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Utopia and the Private Realm

Wallace Berman on Career, Family, and Community

Throughout his professional career, Wallace Berman (1926–1976) remained an obscure figure, even though he was comparable in importance to Kenneth Rexroth in his ongoing efforts to build a network connecting poets and artists. He had only four major exhibitions of his work during his lifetime. The first, in 1957, led to his arrest and conviction for violation of antiobscenity ordinances, an experience that contributed to his desire to avoid public attention. Between 1955 and 1964 his creative energies focused on production of his small journal *Semina*. He worked sporadically on a nonnarrative motion picture, completing about thirty minutes when he put the project aside in the late 1960s. After 1964 he pioneered reprographic art, creating collages on a Verifax copying machine. He worked in assemblage, painting, and photography, and designed book covers and posters. Between 1966 and 1968 he had shows at the Fraser Gallery in London, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Jewish Museum in New York. Only in 1978, two years after his death, was a full retrospective covering the range of his career mounted.

The reasons for Berman's obscurity during his lifetime were complex, and perhaps the term *obscure* is misleading. In 1958 *Look* magazine featured Berman, his wife, and his son as a typical "beat" family. In December 1965 Berman received an unsolicited \$2,000 award from the William and Nora Copley Foundation in recognition of "past achievement in the field of art." A year later he was one of the first recipients of a fellowship from the newly

formed National Endowment of the Arts, an honor he had not sought. Perhaps most surprising for someone as arcane and invisible as he was, in 1967 British artist Tony Cooper placed Berman among the host of cultural icons Cooper assembled for the cover of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, where Berman appeared squeezed between Tony Curtis, W. C. Fields, and Edgar Allen Poe. Berman was a friend of Andy Warhol, who shot two of his films at Berman's home in Los Angeles. He appeared briefly in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) as a sower of seeds in the New Mexico commune, a visual pun on Berman's *Semina* and a token of Hopper's admiration for the man he told a British journal was the "high priest of the scene" in California. In 1990 Hopper reaffirmed his belief that Berman would eventually be recognized as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, a compliment that suggests the ongoing influence of Berman upon Hopper and his motion pictures.¹

He had collectors, largely younger people working in the music and motion picture industries, yet Berman chose to give much of his art away, and under those conditions, no gallery owner could represent him. For a short period, the possibility of financial success seemed to excite him. In a letter to Jay DeFeo in 1965, after making his first sale ever to a collector, he crowed that he felt like a "pro." In 1968, after his London and New York shows, he declined further public exhibitions of his work to devote his energies exclusively to his family and to making art. He told Grace Glueck of the *New York Times* that his shows and sales "have been happening, somehow, at just the right time. But I only want a taste of it. This may be the last show I'll have, so why interview me? I really don't make this scene." He felt that the best thing about the recent spurt of sales was that his wife had been able to stop working. He did not spurn buyers, but he had little patience for planning exhibitions, interviews, and projects. He did not want to be, as he put it to another reporter, part of the "straight art hustle wearing beat clothes."²

After Berman's death in an automobile accident on his fiftieth birthday, he loomed in the recollections of his friends as a model of the consummate artist,

a modern-day saint, a perpetually self-creative, phoenixlike being.³ Yet he had assumed no prophetic airs, following instead a path of restrained quietism. The feminist artist Cameron recalled that “Wally was never very expressive verbally. His style was to be very cool, very hip, which meant you didn’t talk about things too much. You presented people with things and got their reaction.”⁴ Both Bruce Conner and Michael McClure felt so indebted to Berman for the direction of their careers that they were wary of the power he held over them. Yet neither could remember a single instance when Berman had actually tried to convince them of his viewpoint. His inspiration came in the form of casual ideas that fermented long after he had gone home.⁵

Jay DeFeo admired Berman because he was “naturally cool,” which she hastened to explain did not mean that he put on any affectations. It was his total dedication to creativity that she admired. Joan Brown agreed: Berman was “cool” because he didn’t come off like he was cool. She found him to be one of her most supportive friends, a fact she recalled with some curiosity, because she could not recall any instance of his giving her overt encouragement.

I was tremendously influenced by Wally Berman. But by him as a person, not by his work. He just stood, for me, for the whole idea of the individual. And maybe I could never have articulated it at the time. . . . Well, you follow your nose and you do what’s right for you. He sensed that how I was and what I was doing was very right for me. He got those feelings and that message across to me. I understood it clearly, although again, it was not verbal. We were not a verbal bunch and we didn’t need to be at that time.⁶

Filmmaker Stan Brakhage thought that Berman was the creator of “whole new forms,” not only in his own work, but by his suggestions to his friends.⁷ For Michael Fles, an environmental and neon artist, Berman’s example created “a very subtle sense of community, a creative community, a certain hip, ephemeral vibe, and that’s been lost. The art works per se were simply, as in

all vital art, products of a certain life style.”⁸ Berman focused attention away from the art work as an object to its function in relationships between people. Berman’s creation of an assemblage or a poem demanded something in exchange, a response that allowed two people to expose themselves to each other in ideally more intimate and meaningful ways.

In the memories of his friends, Berman assumed a central symbolic role as personification of actualized youthful ideals. Berman had resolved the contradiction between ambition and ideals plaguing his friends and attained “other-worldly” success. As we look more closely, we shall see that domesticity and art were the two poles around which Berman constructed his life, and in many respects they were inseparable. What made Berman “cool” involved commitment to companionate marriage, shared parenting, dedication to craft, loyalty to friends, compassion for those in pain, values that most Americans of the time accepted as an ideal for personal behavior. He lived with an unwavering focus on private, inward concerns and the truth of immediate experience. Yet he could not ignore public life. His first effort to speak to an audience outside his immediate circle ended in humiliation. The analysis he brought to the relationship of private and public spheres will help us understand more fully the ideal project of the avant-garde between 1955 and 1970, as well as how the concern with inner truth made elite artists relevant to contradictions gripping American society.

Age of Innocence: “Art is Love is God”

“He never thought about having shows,” Shirley Berman recalled about her husband:

Occasionally he sold work for hardly anything at all. He usually gave things away. I worked at dress shops in Beverly Hills part-time. As long as he was doing his work and he was satisfied with his work and his friends

were satisfied with his work, he didn't care if he ever showed. If he wanted to show, he would invite people over for a day and fix our front room into a gallery and say, "Here, this is what I'm doing," and serve them wine and cheese.⁹

Their friend, photographer Charles Brittin (b. 1928), observed that

people would just come [to the Bermans' home], and he wouldn't put on a show or entertain you. People came happily and sat down and left four hours later. What happened is that you'd listen to some music and you'd smoke some pot and talk and look at things. What I enjoyed was not the conversation but the things we looked at. We did a lot of that. There were books, pictures, art books, clippings from newspapers. There were evenings where there was not much talk.¹⁰

The informality of Berman's "shows" is apparent from the announcements that he printed himself on his hand press. The cards gave a time and day of the week, but seldom a date; often there was no address other than "Wally and Shirley's." Occasionally the shows were at the Mermaid Tavern, a local bar in Topanga.¹¹

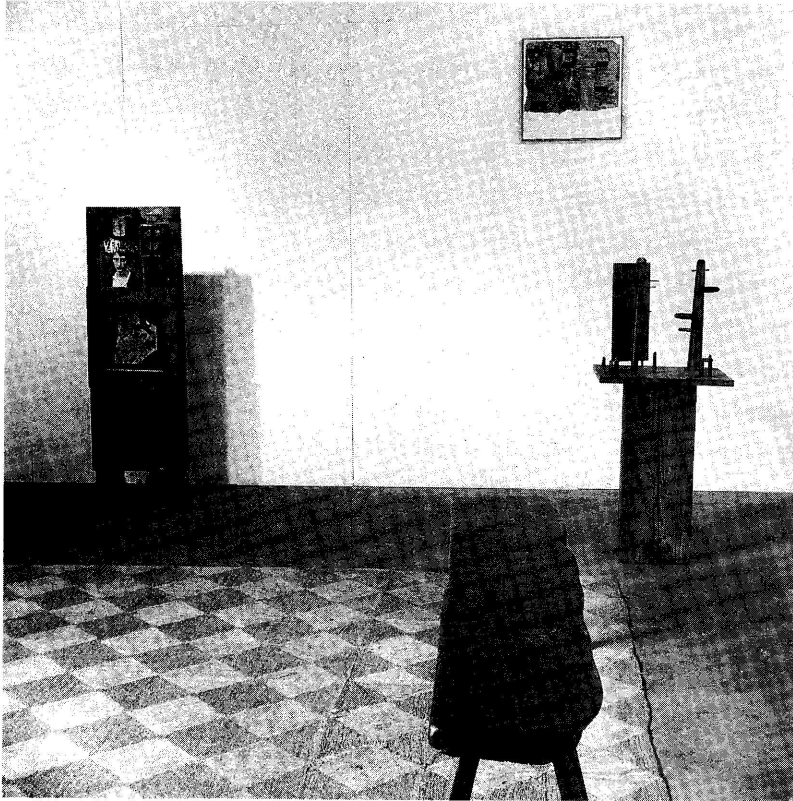
Berman's first public show, drawing from ten years of work in assemblage, painting, and drawing, was in June 1957 at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, owned by Walter Hopps and Edward Kienholz (fig. 18). Shirley Berman recalled his nervousness at presenting his work to a public audience for the first time. He knew how to communicate to his friends, but he was uncertain of the response to his work from people, however intelligent and sympathetic, who did not know him.

The centerpiece of the show was a sequence of four large assemblages: *Homage to Herman Hesse*, *Veritas Panel*, *Cross*, and *Temple*. Berman began working in the assemblage medium in 1949 when he started *Homage to Herman Hesse*, constructed from scrap he brought home from his job as a finisher at the Salem Furniture Factory in East Los Angeles. For six years Ber-

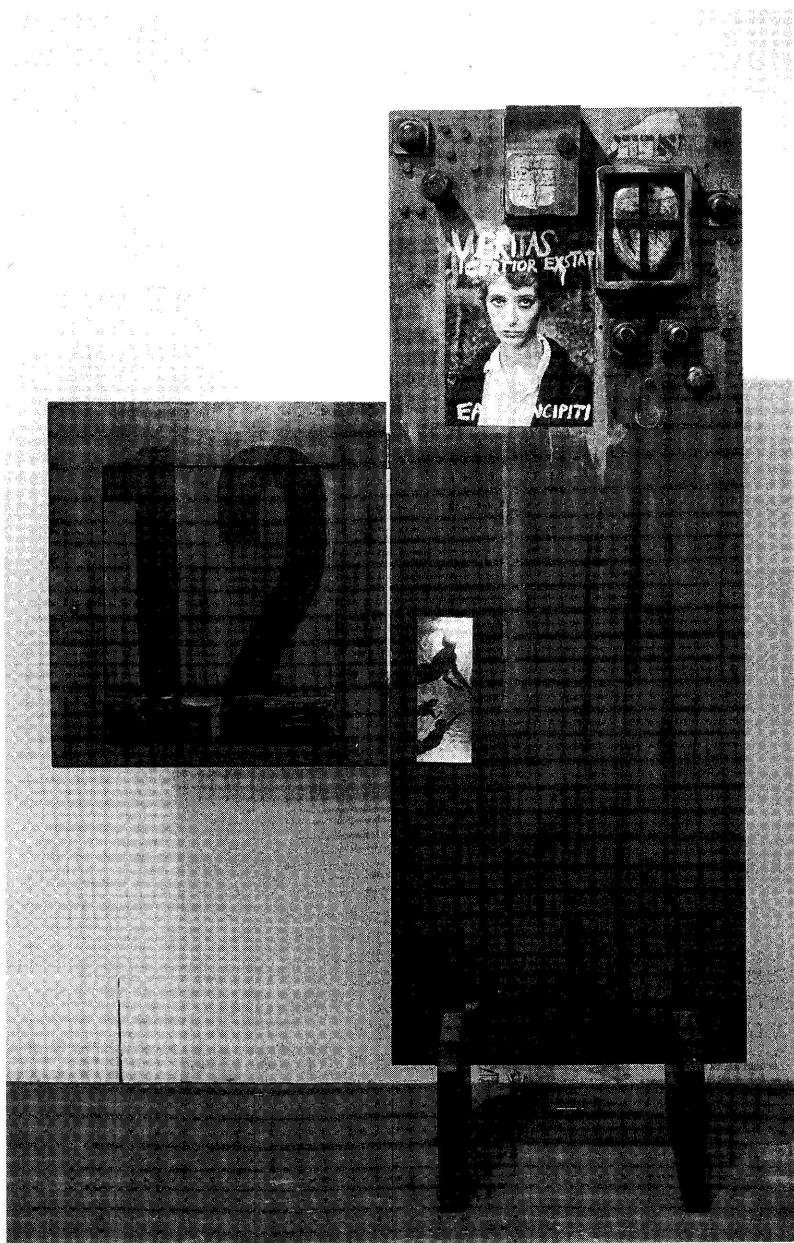
man reworked this piece as he tried to find the simplest but most effective relation of the parts. The struggle with this one work suggests the difficulty that he had with approaching visual composition from a purely formal approach. He did not find his own voice until he stopped worrying about design and began to use found materials to express the relationships that were most important to him. At that point, he stopped calling his work sculpture and started calling them “objects.”¹²

With this breakthrough, Berman embarked on rapid construction of the other large assemblages. Both *Veritas Panel* (fig. 19) and *Cross*, also known as *Factum Fidei* (fig. 20), embodied Berman’s conception of his relationship with his wife as a revelation of the cosmic union of male and female principles in the universe.¹³ At first glance, *Veritas Panel* had the form of a large cabinet. In the center top Berman placed his wife’s portrait with “veritas, certior exstat” scrawled across the top and “ea concipiti” written below. The two Latin phrases state a major theme of the show: the interrelation of domesticity and religion. The upper phrase translates as “Assuredly, the fundamental nature of things is revealed.” The lower phrase has a number of variant translations, each of which is meaningful. On the most direct level, “ea concipiti” means “She has conceived.” The phrase also translates as “She holds things together,” pointing toward the metaphysical implications of sexual reproduction, while a more physiological connotation would simply be “She absorbs, draws in, or has received.” On each level of meaning, woman as wife and mother is presented as the pivot upon which human beings participate in the continuing process of divine creation.

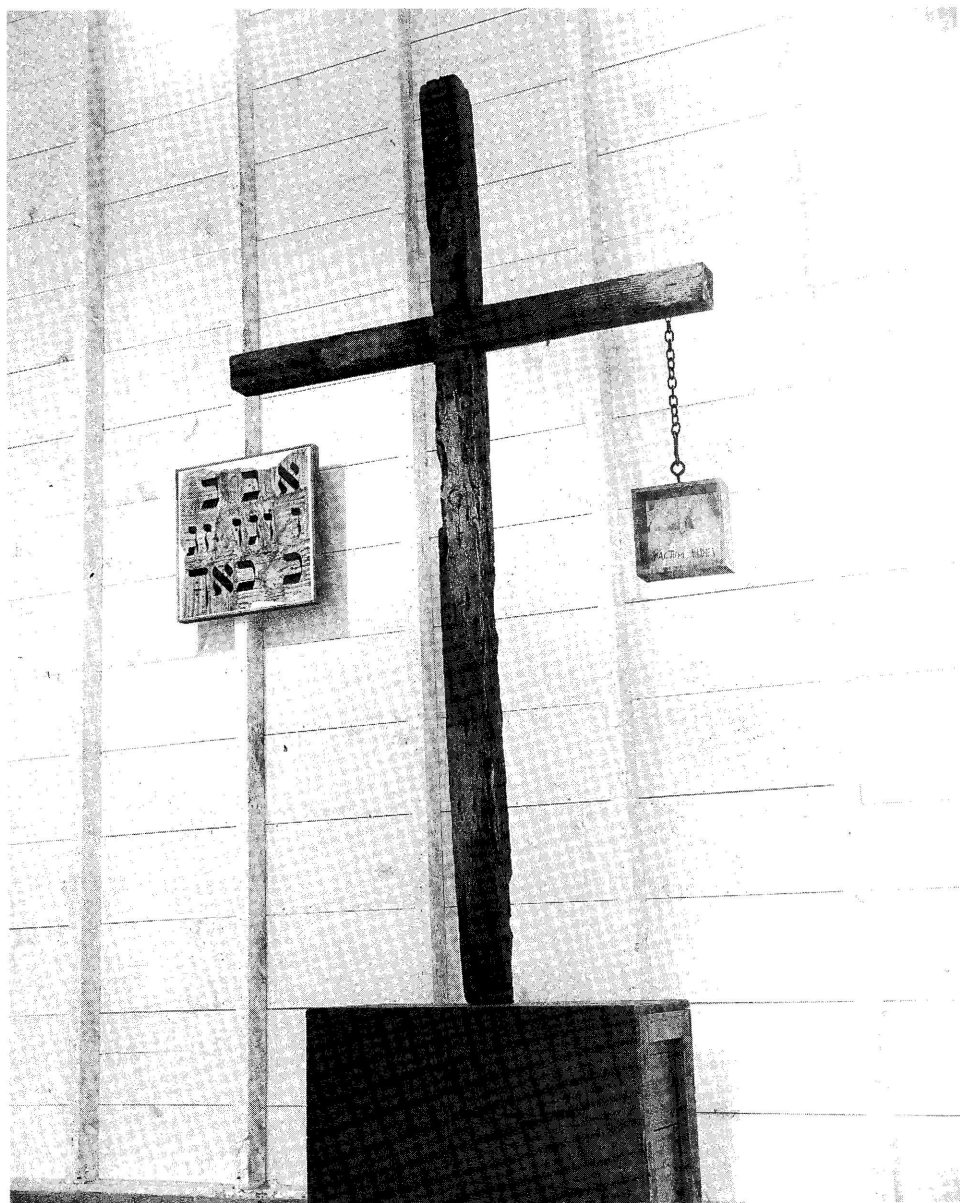
Above and below his wife’s portrait Berman placed two hinged doors. The larger lower door had a drawing made from shoe polish on parchment paper with fragmentary shapes from the Hebrew alphabet. The door opened to reveal a photograph of dancers thrusting their arms upward into light. On the inside of the larger door was the number 12, the magic number of the zodiac and the apostles, as well as the number of paintings included in the exhibit. Walter Hopps recalled that the paintings, each a rendering of Hebrew letters,



18. Ferus Gallery with Wallace Berman exhibition, 1957. Photograph by Charles Brittin.
Courtesy of the photographer.



19. Wallace Berman, *Veritas Panel*, mixed media, 1956. Photo: Charles Brittin.



20. Wallace Berman, *Cross*, also known as *Factum Fidei*, mixed media, 1956–1957.
Photo: Charles Brittin.

stood for the “dead poets,” unnameable since each person had to select his or her own teachers from the past.¹⁴ On the little upper door Berman placed a letter he had written. When viewers opened the little door they discovered a mirror, a central image that dramatized that the attempt to probe more deeply into things leads back to the self and its own reflection. The understanding of any phenomenon coincides with the understanding of self and of being. To the right of the little door was a box with a rock held inside by leather straps forming a cross. Fragments of paper with Hebrew writing hovered over the rock. The panel was dotted with an assortment of knobs and dowels, the sort of objects Berman used everyday when he had worked in the furniture factory.

While the composition functioned independently of Berman’s autobiography and in that sense did not tell a story, the audience to which Berman spoke most frequently knew him and his concerns. A viewer did not need to know the identity of the key photograph to see that the relationship between photographer and subject was romantic and intense, but everyone who saw the piece in Berman’s home, and perhaps most who came to the gallery, knew Shirley personally. Their reactions to *Veritas Panel* took into account what they knew about the Berman marriage.

Similarly, many had heard Berman explain that the א, used in the line of Hebrew script above the rock, was aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and that in the kabbalah aleph was the symbol of Adam, the bringer of order out of chaos by naming the facets of creation. Berman had adopted aleph as his personal symbol and had even painted the letter on his motorcycle helmet. The paintings in the exhibition, each presenting Hebrew letters in different combinations on parchment which he had prepared with shoe polish to give a patina of age, were intended to represent his interest in the kabbalah. However, when Philip Lamantia asked Berman for translations of the inscriptions in the paintings, Berman told him that the Hebrew letters had no specific, translatable sense. He had not learned Hebrew as a child, but he liked the decorative form of the lettering and the moods that the shapes evoked.¹⁵

The word *kabbalah* translates into English as tradition, transmission, reception, or more generally as heritage. Berman's interest in the Hebrew alphabet and its functions in Jewish mysticism was part of an effort to reclaim his ethnic identity. Berman came from a nonpracticing family, but one with a strong cultural sense of being Jewish. His father, who died of tuberculosis when Berman was nine, taught his son that Jews were the "people of the book," but he meant literature and learning in general, not specifically the Hebrew scriptures. His last present to Berman before dying was a complete set of the works of Oscar Wilde and a copy of T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. For Berman, growing up in neighborhoods where many stores had Hebrew lettering on the windows and sold Yiddish newspapers, the alphabet of his ancestors did not spell words, but spoke of traditions and roots discussed at home.

Yet there was a period in Berman's youth when he rebelled against his Jewish heritage. Through the 1940s, as a teenager and in his early twenties, Berman identified more closely with jazz and African-American culture. Bob Alexander, also Jewish, recalled that he and Berman liked the way blacks responded to persecution with "soul," developing a culture based on "a feeling of heart that can be shared." Black culture was an escape from an emphasis on completing formal education, living according to family expectations, or being concerned about developing a profession or business. After his discharge from the navy in 1946, Berman enrolled at Chouinard Art Institute, but he dropped out after six months. He switched to the Jepson Art Institute, then quit that school as well. He sported a zoot-suit and spent his free time in jazz clubs on Central Avenue, the main black neighborhood in Los Angeles at the time. Instead of getting a job, he earned money by playing pool and gambling.¹⁶

Beyond jazz and pool, his other love was French poetry, which may have grown from his memories of his father's love of modern literature. He recalled later that the books he read about the French avant-garde helped "lift him from the poolroom."¹⁷ In 1949 he went to work in a furniture factory, disap-

pointing his mother, who had worked as a seamstress to support her family after her husband's illness. She wanted her son to be more than a manual laborer, but while he remained close to her emotionally, he rejected all her advice as to what was good for him. Only after his marriage in 1952 to Shirley Morand, who was not Jewish, did Berman return to his roots and begin to research Jewish culture, but he selected those aspects that dovetailed with his interests in poetry and art.

Cross directly addressed the interaction of personal and religious values by juxtaposing sexuality against the principle symbol of Christianity. Hanging from one of the arms of *Cross* was a small box containing a low-contrast photograph of loins joined in sexual intercourse shot from the lovers' point of view. The two sets of thighs framing penis and vagina form a mandala image, so that intercourse became a constantly revolving inner center symbolic of cosmic creation. Inscribed under the mandala was the phrase "factum fidei" (act of faith, act of belief). By suspending the box from the cross, symbol of death and resurrection, Berman created a relationship between the intimate, daily source of regeneration and the distant, impersonal processes of universal renewal that Jakob Boehme, sixteenth-century Protestant kabbalist, had seen in the image of the cross.¹⁸ Whether Berman intended to reconcile or contrast Christianity and sexuality is impossible to say. The form presents the intimate literally as a pendant to the abstract. Berman offered a symbol of suffering and an image of pleasure, both of which represent sources of renewal and rebirth. By size and placement, the cross overwhelmed the mandala image. But the sheer psychic energy released in seeing a photograph of an everyday occurrence, the public representation of which was legally forbidden at the time, might have riveted viewers' attention squarely on the box.

Temple portrayed the creation of art as religious initiation through meditation on the meanings of desire, joy, and sorrow. The enclosure, constructed with scrap lumber painted dull black, was dominated by a white-robed figure, the purified candidate of truth, with a large key across its chest. Berman

twisted the figure's head so that it faced inward. Even though the figure greeted the viewer, its thoughts were always focused on its interior journey. Berman scattered pages from the first issue of *Semina* on the floor, contributions of art and poetry from his friends and spiritual teachers. One of the parchment paintings hung within the *Temple*, as well as another photograph of dancers thrusting toward the light above them.

The exhibition's imagery was primarily religious, but Berman identified the divine with the intersection of marriage and art, the two most important aspects of his life. *Veritas Panel* and *Cross* point to marriage and parenting as facts that demanded that a man like Berman establish himself in a time continuum. He reached back to the past to those elements that were meaningful, the ethnic memories of his childhood and the aesthetic explorations of adolescence, to pass on a legacy. This entering into the flood of time by becoming a parent pushed Berman to consider the relationship of past, present, and future as a source for identity. As Berman's close friend Robert Duncan pointed out, social alienation, however pertinent to some beat poets and artists, cannot account in any way for Berman's positive social values, grounded, as they were, in a deep sense of connection to others.¹⁹

Berman positioned himself in society through the relationships he developed with his wife and son. Family rather than profession structured his life, and domesticity became the focal point for defining both himself and the art that he created. We have encountered an approach to art in which individual identity is virtually meaningless. Shirley Berman, gazing at the viewer from *Veritas Panel*, could be the face of "the fundamental nature of things" because her happiness, perhaps even existence, was affected by Wallace's actions. In her gaze, he faced the consequences of his choices. The poster Berman designed for the show, with a photograph of himself and his three-year-old son (fig. 21), advertised the unashamed sentimentality fueling his work, underscored by the slogan "art is love is god" handwritten along the bottom of the image. Art was the bridge to a self as nexus, which in Berman's case meant the family he had built, which provided him with a simplified perspective of

the future that focused his attentions and the identity he saw for himself stretching through time. In this context of mutual dependency, the conventional meanings assigned to objects and images paled before the meanings people discovered through the relations that seemed vital to their existence. The cross and the mandala were symbols for divine intervention in human existence, but Berman identified the symbolic mysticism with the everyday act of male and female living together. Religion was not a system of values the origin of which were exterior to daily life, but the revelation of divine intent that emerged within one's soul in the course of meaningful activities: sexual love, both genital and spiritual; parenting; work; friendship.

There can be no mistaking the ethos of domesticity running through Berman's work. The *Ferus* show presented Berman's image of himself through the relationships he cherished. He had re-created himself through his wife and through his child. Unlike most men, including most artists and poets, he arranged his life so he would not be torn between "career" and family. After the birth of his son, he quit his job at the furniture factory to stay home and take care of the baby, while Shirley worked. His home became the sole focus of his relationship to the world, so that the concerns he had as husband and father constantly informed the topics he handled.

At this early stage in his career Berman's work sat uncomfortably on the border of private and public. His idiosyncratic interpretation of emotions and ideals that were widely shared in the mid-century United States proved to be dangerous. The youthful rebelliousness celebrated in *On the Road* found a prominent place in American cultural life in 1957. An evocation of the sacral character of marriage led to tragic consequences for Berman in 1957. To the degree that career and family were opposing choices for men in the 1950s, allocation of rewards and punishments to Berman and Kerouac stated quite clearly where American society expected male loyalties to be, no matter how much domestic values were touted in the media.

“During the second week of a scheduled month exhibit of my paintings and sculpture,” Berman advised the readers of the second issue of *Semina*, “members of the vice squad entered the Ferus art gallery and confiscated a copy of ‘Semina 1’ which was exhibited as an important part of a work entitled ‘Temple.’ Brought before the righteous judge Kenneth Holiday [*sic*], who, taking the allegorical drawing in question out of context, declared me guilty of displaying lewd and pornographic matter.” Berman had been concerned that the photograph he used in *Cross* could lead to trouble. But since the main gallery was down an alley and away from the street, no pedestrians passing by the gallery could get an accidental viewing of something they might find offensive.²⁰ Nonetheless, the Los Angeles Police Department received two anonymous complaints about the exhibition, and the vice squad telephoned to advise the gallery that they planned on inspecting it and offered the artist the option to remove any potentially objectionable pieces before they arrived.

When confronted with the choice, Berman decided to defy the threat. More was at stake for him than an abstract right to free speech. To succumb was to accept society’s right to dictate religious and family ties. If the intimate and the personal were his source of truth, he had to combat social restrictions on their celebration.

Charles Brittin’s photographs of the investigation (fig. 22)²¹ reflect the insouciant bravado of youth facing an enemy they considered inferior because of its ignorance and blindness. When the moment of the arrest came (fig. 23), Brittin’s picture of Berman shrinking back from the officer in dramatic late-afternoon light starkly captured the feeling of martyrdom that later marked memories of that day.

Yet sacrificial drama did not transpire without farcical entr’actes. “Where is the art?” Walter Hopps reported one police officer saying when he came into the gallery and saw Berman’s paintings and assemblages.²² In their examination of *Cross*, the officers were unable to locate anything objectionable. Berman’s thinking was so foreign to them that a straightforward sexual image

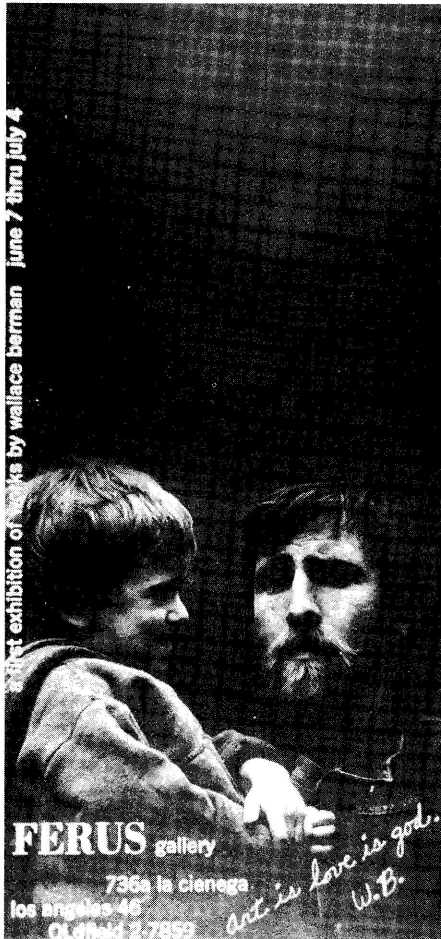
appeared as an abstraction. They huddled, confused about what they should do, and decided to arrest Berman for *Temple*, a piece Berman had never considered could conceivably be problematic.

On the floor of the piece, three feet deep in the back, was a small drawing by Berman's friend Cameron that he had published in the first issue of *Semina* (fig. 24). Cameron had composed an allegorical vision of a woman having intercourse with a penis-headed monster as part of "Anatomy of a Madness," a series she executed while suffering a nervous breakdown after the death of her husband. In this series she portrayed her struggles to regain control of her emotions and her life, to battle the irrational desires and fears assaulting her. Art was the way she confronted and mastered her agony, and therefore one of the reasons why Berman associated her work with his concept of art as "white magic." Cameron had triumphed over her pain by facing it as directly and honestly as she knew how.²³

Cameron's picture was simple enough. Anybody could tell what the "story" was, and for Judge Halliday, that was enough. He refused the defense's motion to present witnesses testifying to the artistic quality of Berman's work, stating, "We have no need to have an art expert tell us what is pornographic."²⁴ Halliday found Berman guilty and gave him a sentence of thirty days in jail or a \$150 fine. On hearing the judge's decision, Berman went to the court chalkboard and wrote, "There is no justice. There is just revenge." Shirley Berman remembered

Wallace was in very bad shape during this whole thing. It hurt him because he couldn't believe that creative people would still have to go through that. It hurt him to put his mother through that, and it hurt him to put us through that. It hurt him just to go through it himself. He was outraged by the whole situation, and I don't think he really wanted to show to begin with. . . . We left Los Angeles because of this. . . . He was heartbroken.²⁵

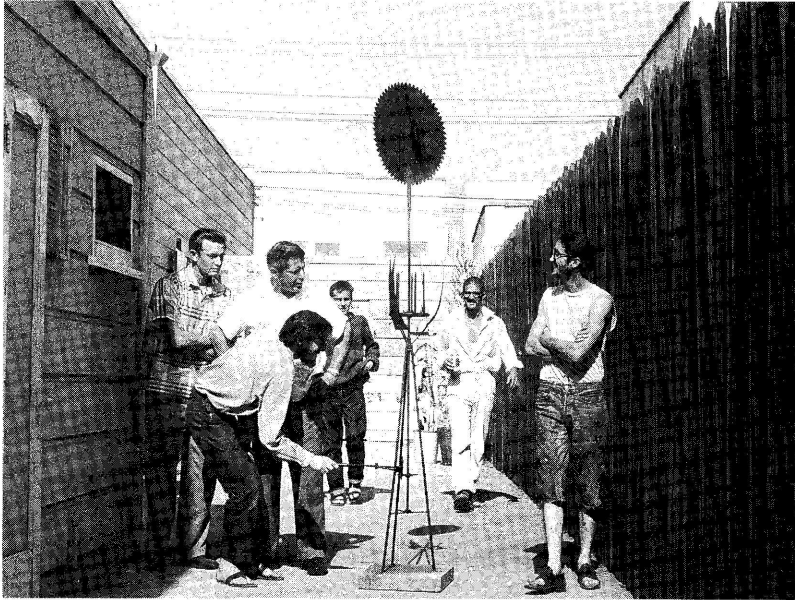
Their friend Dean Stockwell rushed to the bank to get the money for the fine before Berman could be checked into the county jail for the weekend.



21. Wallace Berman, poster for exhibition at Ferus Gallery, 1957; photograph used in poster by Charles Brittin. Wallace Berman papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

22. Left to right: Vice squad officers, Wallace Berman bending over, David Meltzer, Bob Alexander, Arthur Richer; sculpture, Wally Hedrick, *Rest in Pisces*, 1956. Photograph by Charles Brittin, 1957. Courtesy of the photographer.

23. Left to right: Arthur Richer, Wallace Berman, John Reed, vice squad officer. Photograph by Charles Brittin, 1957. Courtesy of the photographer.





24. Cameron, untitled, *Semina 1*
November 1956).

Otherwise, Berman received little public support; perhaps few outside his circle of friends knew of the case. Neither art critics Jules Langsner nor Arthur Millier commented on the arrest and trial in the *Los Angeles Times*. Charles Brittin felt that the episode revealed the remarkable innocence of his generation. “There was a lack of knowledge about how the real world works or can be made to work, which was probably part of its charm. . . . You get benefits and drawbacks in that innocence.”²⁶

The “innocence” was widespread and included the two officers who, unable to see either art or pornography, seized on whatever they could find that might be “smutty,” possibly feeling that some action was necessary to express their disapproval. Berman’s arrest underscored the dangers of the public realm and the very real reasons why many in his generation were hesitant to leave the security of private exchange. The use of illegal drugs was one behavior that required that they shield their activities from public scrutiny. Personal safety encouraged developing one’s ideas within the confines of a “community,” a tendency that countered the public-building aspect of networking.

The choice for Berman in 1957 was clear: personal autonomy or public humiliation. The public world was clearly and unequivocally his enemy. To hold fast to his ideals, he had to retreat from whatever worldly ambitions he might have had. This was easier for him than for many because of the appar-

ently “free” position he occupied in society. Having dedicated himself entirely to his family, he was neither artist as academic nor artist as entrepreneur. He was completely free to construct his own meanings for his experiences because he stood apart from the institutional arrangements that mediated the relationship of most artists to society.

In response to his brush with the law, Berman retreated even further into a highly personal, hermetic language, arcane even to those who knew him. In this he differed from most assemblage artists, whose irony depended upon retaining the conventional meaning of their found objects as an element within their work and whose artistic statements as a result remained relatively accessible. Berman instead problematized meaning, perhaps as John Coplans thought in 1963 to confuse possible censors and avoid further confrontations with the law.²⁷ Aside from occasional commissions for photographs for book jackets, for the next several years Berman worked on two projects that privileged direct private communication to a protective social world consisting entirely of friends and colleagues: his journal *Semina* and an underground motion picture, first shot in 16 mm, but then in 8 mm, which made it even more unlikely that it would be projected anywhere other than at a film society or in the privacy of a home.

With these projects, he remained on the boundary between formal objectivity and the preunderstanding that a subjective network of friendship brought to his work. For those who knew Berman, the individual elements took on deeper significance because they understood how he transformed the concerns of his life into poetic statement. The works he created assumed their meaning through mingling two approaches to experience that did not usually intersect: a daily anecdotal intercourse of friendship; an aesthetic sense of every manifestation as pointing to a deeper level of universal reality. This dualism shifted focus from the creative configuration to the self-revelatory act of refiguration. Like Clay Spohn in the Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects, Berman had arrived at an aesthetic where the object itself was far less important than the care it inspired.

***Semina*: Secession and Community at Mid-century**

Shortly after the trauma of his trial, Berman impulsively abandoned Los Angeles for San Francisco. George Herms, Bob Alexander, and David Meltzer followed, and the circle of intimate friends reconstituted in the north, augmented by new friendships each of them made with young poets and painters in the Bay Area. During his five-year sojourn in northern California, Berman focused almost entirely on the production of his underground journal *Semina* (fig. 25). Already at work on the second issue at the time of his fateful Ferus exhibition, he completed it in December 1957 after his relocation. The nine issues documented Berman's concerns over an eight-year period. The first four issues focused on the relationship of drugs, madness, and the salvific function of art. The fifth issue was dedicated exclusively to representations of Mexico. The last four issues increasingly commented on the relation of art and poetry to social turmoil in the United States.²⁸

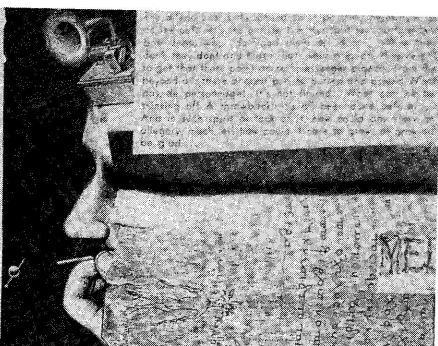
Aside from a handful of copies sold at Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, *Semina* circulated free of charge to a network of creative people whose work and opinions interested Berman. He printed from 150 to 300 copies of each issue on his own five-by-eight hand press. Of the nine editions, only the second was bound. The third, sixth, and ninth issues consisted of a single poem with a cover photograph. In the other five issues, the journal assumed the form that distinguished it from the dozens of other small literary magazines of its day. Berman placed approximately twenty loose-leaf pages of poems, photographs, and drawings into a pocket glued to the inside of a folded cover. The pages were like cards, printed on a heavy paper stock and cut into varied sizes ranging from three by five to six by eight inches. As a reader spread the cards across a flat surface, the pages of the journal formed ever-shifting patterns.

A model for the concept may have been Jess's 1954 contribution to *The Artist's View* (fig. 26). Jess produced this at the time when Berman and his wife, first visiting San Francisco, made the acquaintance of Jess and his



25. Covers for *Semina* 2 (December 1957), *Semina* 4 (1959), *Semina* 5 (undated), and *Semina* 7 (1961).

I need to see the light. They are full of with a prejudice that makes the land
 set with a moral epidemic. The literature of a nation decides the fate of a nation.
 books, good morals. Bad books, bad morals. I begin with the lowest of all
 literature, that which does not even pretend to be respectable—from cover to
 a blotch of leprosy. There are many whose entire business it is to dispare
 his kind of literature. They display it before the school-boy on his way home,
 get the catalogues of colleges and young ladies, the names and
 post-office addresses, and send their advertisements in circulars and their
 pamphlets and their books to every one. The president of one of the finest
 ladies' seminaries on the Atlantic coast was absent one day, one of these
 creants came in and secured the books. The president returning and hearing
 it, had his fears, and he was hunted down, and in his possession was
 found not only a catalogue of that institution but the catalogues of fourteen col-
 es, and in all of these he had done the damning work already. In the posses-
 sion of these dealers in impure literature were found nine hundred thousand names
 profitable to send



All without reservation that man imagines is relatively true, what he has not imagined is absolutely.



FEIGNING SPELL 42-43

Jealousy is said to be the offspring of love. Yet unless the parent makes haste to strangle the child, the child will not rest till it has poisoned the parent.
 —A. W. HAYS.

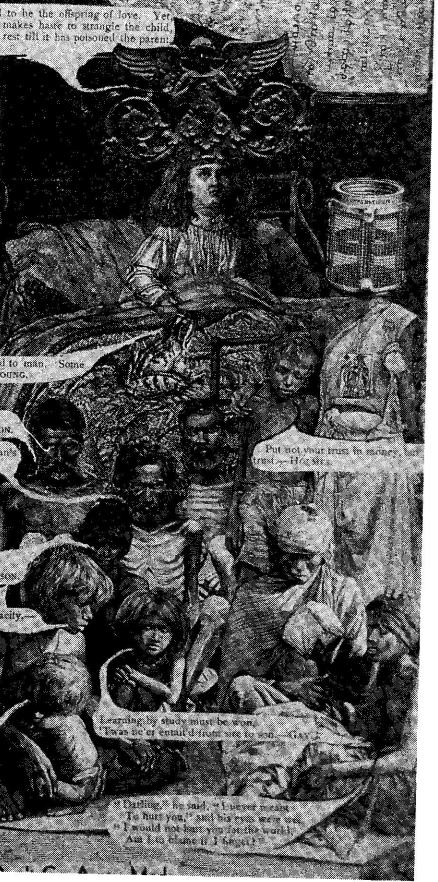


God was ne'er true friend to man. Some sinister intent rains all he does.—YOUNG.

He bears our best loved things away:
 And then we call them "dead!"—LORD LYTTON.

It's a part of my religion never to hurt any man's feelings.—W. D. HOWARTH, D.D.

ANGER ALL HE KENNETH
 A STERD GURN HARRIES A FARGHD THROAT
 O' NOT A FILLY TO A KUNE EET'ADEN
 COVOTE O'D MAN BLIGHT THE BLITER
 KEY BUFF FACT ASS UNWITTED
 KING WROTH DISMISS IT NIGMAN
 O' for the lopeh of I vatched hand
 And the sound of a wire that is still.—TENNYSON



"Pray that this may be cut short," said St. Clare. "This wings my heart to
 Oh, bless the Lord! it's over, it's over, dear master," said Tom, "look
 The child lay panting on her pillows as one exhausted, the large, clear eyes
 up and fixed. Ah, what sad these eyes that spoke so much of heaven? Ear-
 and "earthly pain," but so solemn, so mysterious, so mysterious was the
 (that fine that it checked even the sons of sorrow. They pressed
 "Eva," said St. Clare, gently. She did not know each dull hour since her
 (Oh, Eva, tell us what you see. What is it?" said her father.
 bright, a glorious smile passed over her face, and she said brokenly, "Oh, love,
 peace!" gave one sigh, and passed from death into life.
 rwell, beloved child. The bright, eternal doors have closed after thee,
 see thy sweet face no more. Oh, woe for them who watch after thee,
 t when they shall wake. Oh, woe for them who watch after thee,
 prayer!
 (Sweet child, Art. One of an eye, a man may be, it cold
 I should not have your father's words
 Am I to change if I should?"

26. Jess, two pages from *The Artist's View* no. 6 (undated, 1954).
 Courtesy of the artist.

companion, Robert Duncan. *The Artist's View* was a cooperative publication produced in San Francisco between 1951 and 1954. Its purpose was to allow artists and poets to comment on topical events and present an aesthetic alternative to political ideology. Each edition took the form of a broadsheet, the content and design of which was the product of a single person. There was no collective presentation, since the essence of the "artist's view" was personal vision. Madeline Gleason, Hassel Smith, David Park, and Robert Duncan were among the contributors. In his issue Jess collaged words and images into a form that undercut attempts to make literal sense. Broken free from their superficial rational moorings, the clippings that Jess collected suddenly revealed a wealth of alternative meanings as the reader's fancy recast the effusive material. Interpretive freedom came from exploiting the surplus meaning created through sheer quantity and multiplication of potential connections.²⁹

In *Semina* Berman intensified the effect of unclosable meaning by cutting the fragments into cards. This simple decision transformed the journal into the equivalent of a tarot deck. Each reading meant a reshuffling and redealing of the materials to reveal an entirely new meaning (fig. 27). Each time readers confronted the cards in a new combination, they discovered potentialities for meaning appropriate to their spiritual state at the moment.³⁰ The format represented reading as a visualizing of a field of connections that were continuous, multiple, and shifting. Given a potentially infinite field of meaning, focus shifted from the work as a formal piece to the subjective reaction and self-understanding uncovered by the sheer accident of coming across a poem or a graphic image.

A regular feature of the journal were translations of lyrics by classic writers. Poems by Jean Cocteau and Herman Hesse appeared in the first issue. Rabindranath Tagore, Paul Éluard, Paul Valéry, and Charles Baudelaire were featured in the second issue. Later issues included excerpts from Antonin Artaud, as well as Chinese and Mexican poets. The classic writers were like the "dead poets" in Berman's *Ferus* show. They pointed to a wisdom tradition from which young poets could draw, but most of the journal was devoted to

OPUS

*There are two faces here: crystal
Dante's smile - just Tolson
Walter Reed's frown - the line
Of the great Adam - or face reflecting
The world's of sacramental power - now
Completed - continuing to serve
The gods of an ancient performed
Ritual - bringing it out around
The mountain - PA 1986
The gods are still looking back*

ART IS LOVE IS GOD

*By someone who says he is God
and who says he is not
in Jack's own way
For John Finch & David Moore*

FAIRYTALE FOR TOSH

*The wolf is dead The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead*

BOXED CITY

*My beautiful wife
Reverence deaf photographs - talks
Rising & dances off four walls
She Tash pencils the faithful
Images & ignores the subtle drama
Stands in black corduroy I continue
To separate seeds
From the hull*

RAPIST & VOICETHROWER

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FIRST & LAST FEARPOEM

*If only we can split
Before the Cuckoo's dream
The Man swings close - but upon
Ace with seven heads cocked
His fuck his down home fuck
I'm close - my down has its base
From the pulse of the Chachostomian
Nectar's Tangle*

SOME essay-idea titles by Robert:

BAT WING
THE DREAM DETECTIVE
FIRE TONGUE

DOPE
THE HAND OF FU MANCHU
THE INSIDIOUS FU MANCHU
THE GREEN EYES OF BAST

*Nimble as Gwella
In Albany as State Agent
Silhouette of the Elizabethan brain
Deep in your throat an orange with
Flowers*

27. Selected cards from *Semina 7*, "Aleph, a gesture involving photographs, drawings, and text" (1961).

contributions from contemporaries. Old friends like Bob Alexander (published under the name of e. i. alexander) and David Meltzer remained steady contributors. Michael McClure, who first wrote to Berman in 1957 on Walter Hopps's recommendation, was the most frequent contributor. The first part of McClure's "Peyote Poem" forms the entirety of the third issue, and McClure's "Dallas Poem," a response to the Kennedy assassination, was the sole contents of the final issue of *Semina*. McClure connected Berman to others, including Jack Kerouac, whose work he thought might fit Berman's purposes. *Semina* was the first publication to print an excerpt from William Burrough's novel *Naked Lunch*, though of necessity, the two short paragraphs gave only a flavor of Burrough's baroque language without conveying its paranoid narrative structure.³¹

Berman's own work appeared in all nine issues. Most of the photographs used were his. In the fourth issue, he included stills from his motion picture in progress. *Semina* 7 consisted entirely of his own work, graphics and poetry. Prior to *Semina* 7, Berman's poetry appeared under pseudonyms, each of which was a constructed alterego. Pantale Xantos presented his attitudes toward heroin and self-destruction.³² Marcia Jacobs was a reincarnation of the early twentieth-century French-Jewish poet Max Jacob. Peder Carr likely represented Berman in his guise as working-class intellectual. Berman's alteregos underscore that the diaristic aesthetic is not autobiographical, neither in the novelistic sense of constructing a life story as growth through progressive overcoming of obstacles, nor in the empirical sense of drawing upon actual events to seek a harmonizing of experience onto a higher level. Berman used his alteregos to imagine other ways of being, often contrary to the choices he had made. His alteregos were literary conceits that helped him reaffirm the actual commitments that provided the ongoing structure of his life.³³

A poem by Berman, "Boxed City," published in *Semina* 7, was a key work because in presenting what might be a typical moment in the Berman household he laid bare his aesthetic principles:

My beautiful wife
Rearranges deaf photographs talks
Rococo & dances off four walls
Son Tosh pencils the faithful
Image & ignores the subtle drama

Stoned in black corduroy I continue
To separate seeds

From the bulk.

The work is a snapshot in words, but consider the parallels built into the poem. Seeds might easily refer to marijuana, given the photograph of a marijuana field also used in this issue and Berman's description of himself as "stoned." But in the context of *Semina* seeds also refers to the individual pieces of poetry and art his friends have sent him. It might also refer to images he has discovered in his perusal of magazines. "Separating from the bulk" then could just as easily mean isolating those gems that spark a reaction in him from the "bulk" of ever-present media output, a few of which, nonetheless, like the photograph of the woman stripping, also used in this issue, for whatever quirky reasons have struck him as meaningful. This second reading is supported by the contrasting activity of his wife rearranging "deaf" photographs, meaning, perhaps, that they are objects for themselves, unresponsive to the queries and concerns of their viewers. Art engages in dialogue, a vision that generates an interpretation from the viewer-reader that bounces against the work, provoking another interpretation, engendering a continual shifting of meaning as one probes the possibilities within a statement. This process is what Berman understood the kabbalah to mean: reception is transmission. Mere images (the bulk) evoke no response; they stymie communication. Yet Berman presented himself as "deaf" as the photographs. A suggestion that combined with "stoned" and the nonreflective sense of black points toward his own self-absorption.

Getting no response, Shirley continues to try to provoke a reply with increasingly elaborate talk. Yet that reading might be unfair. Perhaps the talk grows “rococo” and “dances” off the walls because she *is* getting a response, and the two of them are engaged in the banter of fanning the breeze and finding meaning by trading interpretations with ever wilder trajectories—in which case, the seeds might easily be those few photographs that the two of them find meaningful and the bulk are those that remain uncommunicative and will be excluded from the set of cards eventually mailed to readers.

The poem is written for a reader who, like Tosh, literally and lyrically at the center of the poem and penciling a “faithful image” because perhaps not diverted by the drama and taking sides, can see a range of possible meanings in a given moment. The work of art that Berman valued, be it visual or verbal, helped to create an empowered subjectivity by giving it less a point of view than a point of viewing that allowed readers to become present within the scene so that they could determine each in their own ways, in connection with other experiences, what might be happening—or even if it is a meaningful event.

An open aesthetics implied a self critically engaged with its environment without being overwhelmed. The allure of objectification, so strong in the poetry and painting of Rexroth, Still, and other 1940s predecessors, evaporated into another strategy for confronting a world dominated by powerful, often hostile forces: pure subjectivity. Berman imagined himself as a pattern of response. Unlike DeFeo’s quest in *The Rose*, he had no redemptive single image that had to be attained at all cost. He gave himself over to mutability and adaptability.

The journal provided a common ground for working out a value structure and a community entirely bounded by Berman’s personal interests. His concept of community presumed the coterminous existence of entirely different

communities in each of the people Berman incorporated into his. Community was an imaginary construct, woven together by Berman's perception of overlapping interests. The assumed complementarity was valid only for the task at hand, and for nothing else. Collective imagery became the way that Berman constructed his own self-image, so that his social being in *Semina* had no definition outside the people he valued in the journal. An aesthetic of open meaning allowed him to expand his own capabilities by imaginatively assuming his contributors' lives and thereby experimenting with different roles he could play.

Semina also established a basis for challenging the consensual norms of the broader society that had persecuted him. While one aspect of this imaginary community was the retreat of a wounded ego to a secure haven, another aspect was the creation through a common ideology of aesthetics of a minority consensual group that could propound alternative norms, develop them, and then interact with other groups in society to change legislated norms. Philip Lamantia recalled that Berman spoke of *Semina* as a medium for focusing a coherent and cohesive group of artist-poets into a movement like the surrealists.³⁴ Yet the model of interventionist vanguard does not fit at all the form of the journal or its method of distribution. Something more intimate occurred with *Semina*—the construction of an imaginary community to provide emotional support in the battle to define that which is most intimate and personal. The community had to be imaginary because any assumption of normative power would simply re-create the coercive structures artists thought they could escape. Having come into conflict with the repressive power of the law, Berman attempted to create a relatively autonomous subgroup within society. This group was particularly fragile because its origin lay in an imaginary mental construction. It substituted affective ties for shared positional interests and included within it individuals with divergent motivations and states of psychological adjustment. *Semina* proposed an ideal collective subjective state for this putative community, one that its members could look upon and project

onto Berman the man, who thereby became the symbol of their own youthful hopes, in part because he brought them together momentarily to define an ideal conception of human sensibility.

Instead of defining an institutional position that would allow his group to negotiate with other powers in society, Berman relied upon the potential within the aesthetic process to subvert the power of normative images and normative subjectivities. By functioning entirely as a private exchange, the journal escaped public scrutiny and challenge. *Semina* engaged the public world peripherally, in a way not calculated to change it in any respect. That the journal's putative community was artificial, however, actually strengthened its capability to thrust a new imagination of consensual norms for social interaction into other sectors of society. By reaching out to people who led active lives in a variety of institutional settings, many in the motion picture and popular music industries, the journal gained a potential to affect symbolic relations beyond its own narrow circle.

The concept of community Berman projected was based in his experience of marriage and parenting, the domestic ideal that he shared with most Americans of his generation. The theme of parenting as an exemplary type of human relations appeared in the first issue of *Semina*, in lines from a surrealist poem by Bob Alexander: "i was no / longer being what i was but i was being / what i am together / me and a little girl, nine minutes old. / glory!" Since the community existed within the heart, much like the ties binding parents and children, the application of sanctions against destructive behavior was emotionally difficult. Relations assumed an unconditional aspect, demanding concern rather than judgment, care rather than punishment. The heavy hand of legal sanctions had fallen upon Berman for expressing his love for wife, child, and friends. His own experience required that his imaginary community had to coexist without any sanctions applied to symbolic interaction.

Yet any community, even an imaginary one, has its share of unhappy and poorly adjusted people who abuse themselves and those who love them. One

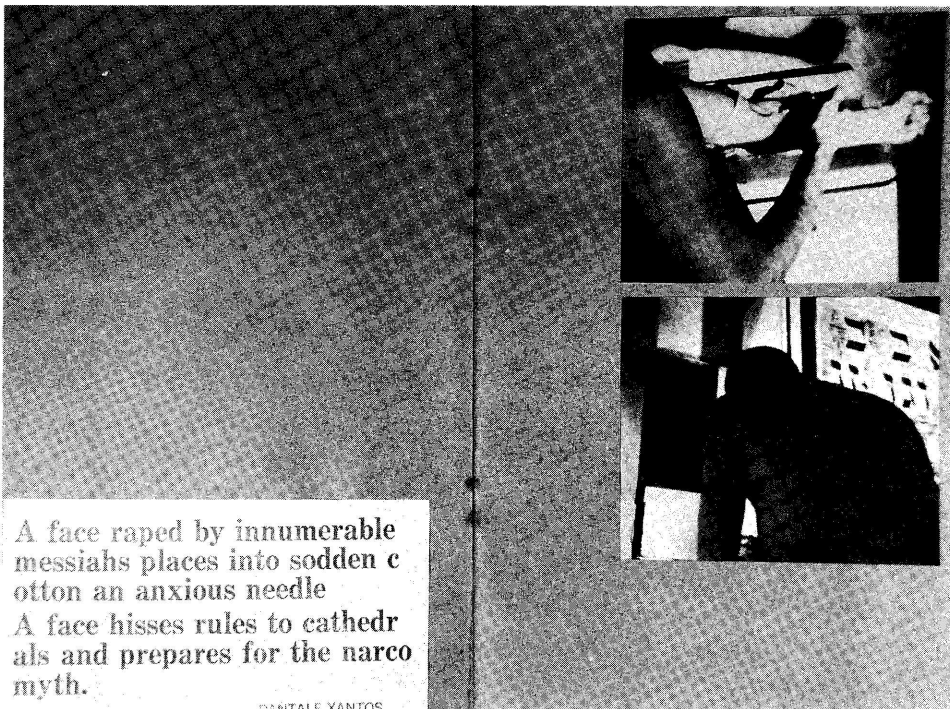
of the ruptures within his “community” reproduced within *Semina* concerned the relative virtues of narcotics and psychedelics. “Morphine mother / Heroin mother / Yage mother / Benzedrine mother / Peyote mother / Marijuana mother / Cocaine mother / Hashish mother / Mushroom mother / Opium mother / Mescaline mother,” runs one of Pantale Xantos’s contributions to *Semina* 4. Robert Duncan observed that this is a chant similar to the transcriptions Antonin Artaud made of Tarahumara incantations sung before the religious rite that includes the ingestion of peyote. In the peyote cult the acolyte pledges loyalty to the mother goddess dwelling in the cactus, for in eating it worshippers give up their bodies to return to the spiritual state in which souls exist before birth. Return to normal consciousness involves a sense of rebirth, the substance taking the place of one’s literal mother. The ritual is a sign of maturity. The initiate has learned through bodily experience that the everyday world is only a small part of reality. One has passed from the narrow connections of one’s immediate elders to a state of open connectedness to the universe.³⁵

In this chant Xantos seemed to equate the various paths to extended consciousness, but the role of this alterego was to manifest what might have happened to Berman had his love of poetry not “lifted him from the poolroom.” In *Semina* 7, Berman presented a portrait of Xantos, a photograph of himself as he might appear if he lived on the streets. The tragic aspiration of this picture was undercut by pathos. The cracked open shoe conflicts with the clean-cut, youthful face. Xantos is altogether too neat, and perhaps too sorrowful, to be descending into hell. Compared to other heroin-related images in *Semina*, the portrait of Xantos is weak and half-hearted.

The contribution that Scottish novelist Alexander Trocchi made to *Semina* 2 provided a harder vision. Trocchi arrived in Venice, California, in 1957 preaching the liberatory qualities of heroin. It was a strange kind of salvation that Trocchi had found. Addiction provided a practical framework for achieving “systematic nihilism,” since he believed all value and loyalties dissolved when the body was in a state of urgent biological need. Heroin allowed

Trocchi to live his “own personal dada.” He came from a country where addicts registered with the government and received a daily allotment of heroin. Britain’s enlightened policies undercut the crisis that Trocchi sought as the source of spiritual freedom, so he emigrated to the United States, where satisfying a craving involved eluding the dangers of arrest and death from adulterated supply.³⁶ Berman published eight sentences from *Cain’s Book*, Trocchi’s novel about his experiences as an addict in the United States. The excerpt begins with a description of the needle going up and down while blood fills the dropper. Elsewhere in the issue was a photograph by Walter Hopps of a dead shark washed up on a seaweed-strewn beach. Berman’s readers familiar with Philip Lamantia’s poem “Black Sea” might have recalled a reference to turning loose the shark within the soul, with its concluding line, “How brief the pleasure in our pain.”³⁷ Trocchi’s selection ends with the heroin user transformed into a wild beast, stalked by “the man” (police, authority), but fierce and contemptuous because it lives under constant threat.

Six pages before this selection, Berman presented two photographs he took of Philip Lamantia injecting heroin into his arm (fig. 28).³⁸ On the opposite page is a prose poem by Pantale Xantos printed in large, bright red letters. “A face,” Xantos says twice, but a face is exactly what is missing from the grim, grainy photographs, a feature that began with the cover, showing a woman’s face erased except for her eyes. Erasure of the face was a motif that Berman returned to throughout his career. For the cover of *Semina 7* Berman showed a woman strapped into the chair of the gas chamber, her face rubbed out. In 1963 he began a series of portraits of celebrities in which again he erased all facial features. Erasure of face suggests erasure of self, but the varying contexts in which Berman used this motif undercut a single emotional reaction. The motif of facelessness may easily portray the insignificance of individuality in its confrontation with the divine. Following this reading, capital punishment is a presumptuous arrogation by society of divine capabilities, while the self-erasure accompanying heroin use is inconsequential. Both merely hurry what will occur in any event, the reabsorption of the individual



A face raped by innumerable
 messiahs places into sodden c
 otton an anxious needle
 A face hisses rules to cathedr
 als and prepares for the narco
 myth.

DANTAI F. XANTOS

28. Pages from *Semina 2* (December 1957). Photographs and text by Wallace Berman.

into cosmic flux. There is no forbidden pleasure in the image of Lamantia nodding out beneath the Hebrew letters **בב**, a double presentation of beth, which in the kabbalah stands for language as the house within which humanity dwells and finds its self-nature. The poet stills that talent of his that most makes him a human being in order to achieve momentarily the mute objectivity of a rock or of the shark belly that a few pages later remains a cold reminder that living creatures are transitory manifestations.

There is no sentimental relaxation of tension in Berman's presentation of heroin use, nor is there is any condemnation. The "narco myth" in Xantos's prose poem is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, "narco myth" points to stereotypical presentations of "junkies" in the mass media, evidence of society's inability to comprehend individual paths to religious experience. On the other hand, "narco myth" refers to the incorporation of narcotics into a

mythic view of spiritual development. Transgression and regeneration were points on the cycle of personal growth that corresponded to winter and spring, decay and rebirth. The withering of the soul in confrontation with ineffable forces was part of the preparation for spiritual resurrection. Stuart Perkoff's poem "boplicity," which appeared in *Semina* 4, presents life as a desert that must be struggled through before redemption can be achieved:³⁹

miles &
 miles
for a
 to hold that much cool
water water water
 when I'm thirsty
plenty of ice cold
 when I'm dry
when I die

The thinned connections between the individual lines, with the possibility that the lines could be imaginatively reshuffled to draw out new implications in the game created with any particular set of words, conveys Perkoff's desperation in his search for a state of "cool," that essential accolade his generation spontaneously applied to Berman.

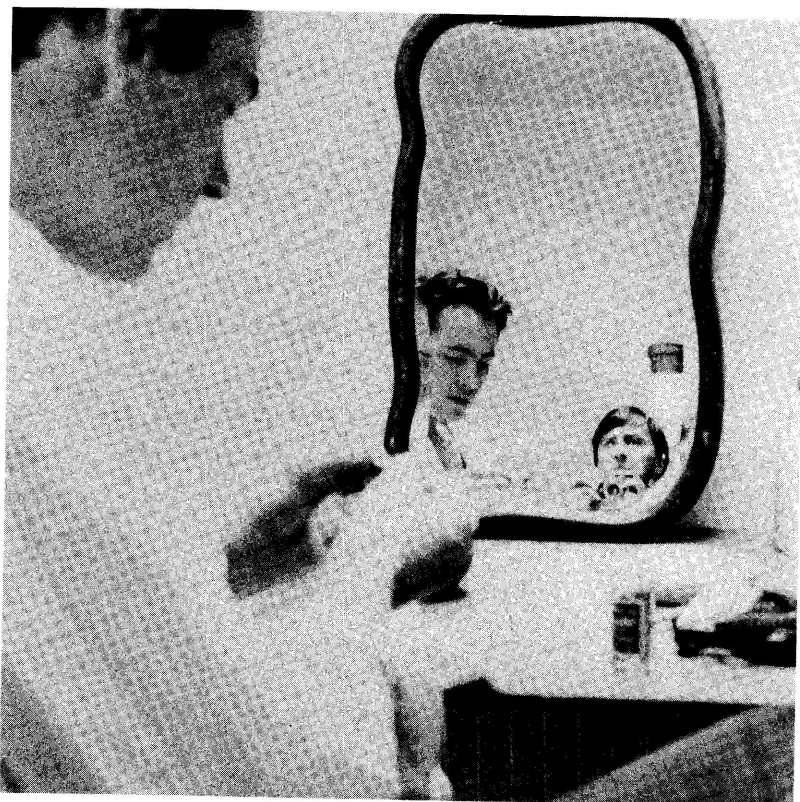
The term "cool" as applied to Berman in his guise as ideal type of his generation meant openness to the multiplicity of meaning inherent to being alive. The coexistence of life and death, as well as the divine and mundane, in every phenomenon undercut the stability of meaning that society imputed to human action. Cool was a response to the potential meaninglessness of human value that asserted an enjoyment of multiplicity. By treating life as a game of potentiality, the cool attitude assuaged the cognitive dissonance that led to madness, as in Cameron's case, or heroin addiction, as with Stuart Perkoff and Alexander Trocchi. No meaning, no matter what its source, could dominate a

person open to multiplicity because there was always another possible interpretation coming around the corner.

If Berman did not use the pages of *Semina* to condemn those who used heroin, he did not use narcotics himself, and he was critical of the effects that addiction had on people's lives. The dislike he felt for heroin use led him to break off his friendship with Bob Alexander for several years. Berman countered the narco-myth of heroin with his own myths of peyote and marijuana. Berman's most personal issue of *Semina* was originally to be called "Cannabis Sativa," stressing his belief that being stoned helped him experience more clearly the intersection of order and chaos. Three years earlier he had published Michael McClure's "Peyote Poem" in *Semina* 3, a work that provided a statement of how confrontation with the divine through the use of visionary drugs could lead to a sense of greater connection and urgent responsibility for the well-being of others.

Berman had appeared one afternoon in 1958 at McClure's apartment with some peyote buttons. Describing with encyclopedic detail Native American uses of peyote, Berman calmly prepared the buttons for ingestion. He did not ask McClure if he wanted to take them, nor did he recommend their use. He limited his discussion to a third-person, historical account of the origins and rituals involved in the peyote religion. Then, while McClure was distracted with a phone call, Berman vanished, leaving the buttons. McClure decided to take them and recorded the experience in a poem he wrote the following morning.⁴⁰ He was surprised to find that spirituality led back to flesh, to a secure sense of understanding that was pacifying rather than threatening:

I hear
the music of myself and write it down
for no one to read. I pass fantasies as they
sing to me with Circe-Voices. I visit
among the peoples of myself and know all
I need to know.



29. Wallace Berman and Michael McClure, ca. 1958. Photograph by Wallace Berman. Wallace Berman papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

McClure had hallucinations characteristic of psychedelic experiences, but he passed through them unworried, for the peyote had imparted to him the knowledge that, like the gods in Buddhism, these illusions were projections of his own desires and fears, objectified into external forms. They could hurt him only as long as he was ignorant that their sources were the travails of his own ego (that is, historical) formation.

I smile to myself. I know
all that there is to know. I see all there

is to feel. I am friendly with the ache
in my belly. The answer
to love is my voice. There is no Time!
No answers. The answer to feeling is my feeling.
The answer to joy is joy without feeling.

Two sensations accompanied his sense of distance from his own self-formation: spaciousness and stomach ache. On the one hand, the possibility of moving instantaneously to any point of infinity opened before him. All possibility was his. It was not at all ethereal. He had no sense of floating on a cloud. Eternity had the “grim intensity” and firmness of rock. Possibility, however infinite, had the tangibility of “primordial substance and vitality.” The connections that the poet sought were not simply his fantasies, but the ability to pierce through everyday illusions and see the alternatives that could come into being. By articulating them, he hoped to make them tangible enough for others to share in the choice between the various layers of “what is.” The stomach ache was simply a reminder that this knowledge was gained through a physical substance, a strongly alkaloid cactus that his system had difficulty digesting. McClure announced,

My belly and I are two individuals
joined together
in life

This lesson guided him for the next thirty-five years of his poetic career: spirit could not be separated from flesh. In his work before this experience, he had aspired to be the Shelley of his day, spiritual and ethereal, liberated from the “meat” that kept his soul chained to earthly desires. He decided that during one’s earthly life the highest spiritual states were attained through physical states of being. McClure thought that this was unconscious, but common knowledge. Most people sought salvation through physical actions

like sports, sexuality, alcohol, or drugs. They condemned themselves, or accepted the condemnation a repressive elite culture placed on mere bodily activity. Their instincts led the average man and woman to knowledge, but they failed to see their own natural wisdom because their culture had told them that flesh and spirit were distinct. The greatest ages of writers, the Elizabethan dramatists and the classical Greeks poets and dramatists, however, had understood, so their works had to be filtered through the castrating sieve of the Metaphysical poets and neo-Platonist philosophers.

Twelve years afterward, when McClure had stopped taking all drugs, he tried to describe the visions he had experienced. Drugs connected him but did away with his sense of interrelationships between things in the universe. Everything he saw stood “coldly and disparate from one another, with none of what Robert Duncan calls ‘glamours’ connecting them or weaving between them.” Eternity was “an inescapable hall of cold objects radiating their own light.” For months afterward, he continued to see light coming out of objects, light that did not warm or attract.

I had to rewarm the universe by means of my own invention, to actually feel it through again, and say, “Well, alright, I’ve seen now how it is, I’ve seen it stripped of its warmth, its glamours, its perfumes, stripped of the masks that we’ve falsely pulled over it, and now I have to warm that universe again so that I can inhabit it.” Because it *was* uninhabitable for me.

To exist, love had to be deliberately and obstinately chosen. The irrational act that made humans free was to will into existence what they wanted and needed. Love meant clinging to that which was most immediate in one’s life. Love, as metaphor for choice, created a homeostatic system that allowed the universe to renew itself. Freedom did not exist independently of law or neces-

sity, but was bound to them as the factor that overcame the entropic tendency of rational systems.⁴¹

The isolating aspect of heroin, explored vicariously by Pantale Xantos and lived by Trocchi, Perkoff, and too many of Berman's friends, derived from grimly accepting the world as it existed as an infrangible given. Narcotics provided an avenue to withdraw from all responsibility for the state of the outer world, from all meaningful connections with other people, in a premature rush to reabsorption to cosmic flux. This aspect of the "narco myth" Berman opposed from the first issue of *Semina*, when he quoted Herman Hesse's "To a Toccata by Bach" as a proposal for what he wanted to accomplish: "Wherever the seeds of light, the magnificent, falls / Comes change, things are fashioned." The "sacred" does not take one out of the body, but deeper into it. "Desire and need," Hesse's poem continued, "form a triumphal arch / Of the vault of Heaven." To move deeper into the body is to discover God through a sense of placement, relationship, connection. Augmentation, rather than diminution, of individual experience led to action to preserve what mattered and oppose what threatened. Thus, strangely, experimentation with drugs need not mean removal from the world, but could, at least theoretically, lead to a sense of social obligation and a desire to change the world as it exists.

The argument remains on an intellectual level. In part 3 we will examine how these ideas led to specific patterns of interaction with society at large. Those events that determined the outcome of the avant-garde as a social force took place in a context in which poets and artists entered into an arena of social contention that was not structured by their needs or desires. Even the messages they tried to transmit assumed importance because they seemed to answer questions poets themselves were not asking. Our goal at this moment is to break through the polemics of the era and consider, foregoing both moralism and enthusiasm, how apparently negative, escapist, and irresponsible behavior such as drug taking could assume a socially positive aspect. Drug

taking was not an unfortunate irrelevancy but an essential element in formulating the social ideology of the California avant-garde.

In McClure's peyote vision, we see a universe based on law, cold and inexorable. It was a world of rationality, without any need for rational beings to think it, for its occupants are compelled to think only what they must. What the vision conjured up as the inevitable reaction was the power of will and imagination to break through necessity and create an environment, however engulfed by law, where humans would want to live. Freedom was McClure's theme, irrational and unpredictable. Love, the choice to need and desire another person, was the key to creating a social environment not dependent upon forms of obligation. Poetry was a form of love, but only because it was a type of labor that linked people through exchange:

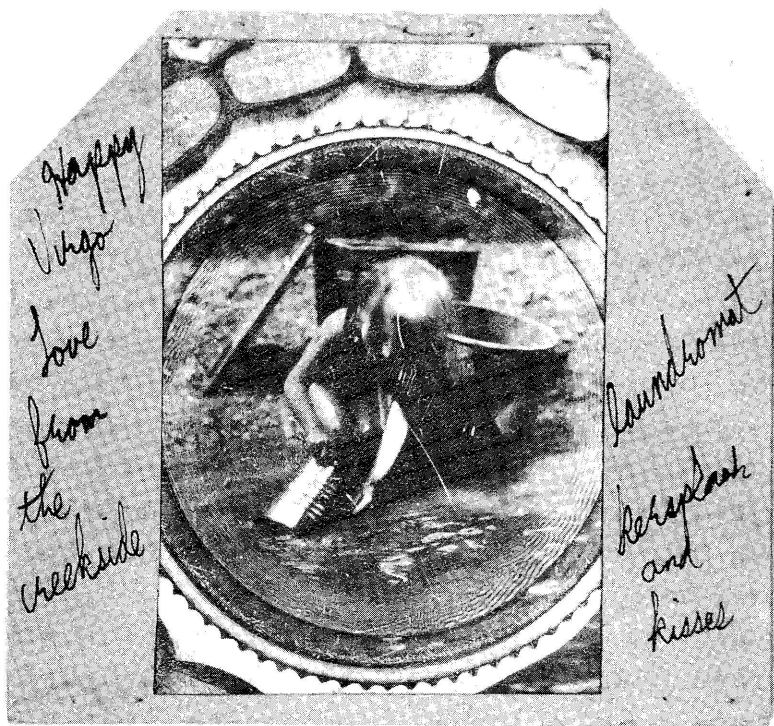
I certainly don't believe now in a big force called Love that's swishing through and permeating the universe, drifting and floating in it because I've seen that objects stand discrete from each other in space. (I don't believe that the universe looks like *this* anymore, either—I'm telling you about how I saw it *then*.) . . . If there *aren't* these warm forces moving through it, then I'm going to have to invent whatever there is—by my own *deeds*, as well as with words. So if there is a Love, I will have to invent it: I'll have to make it—maybe even discover it, or discover the possibilities of it. If there's any Chivalry or Nobility, then I'll have to make those things. And any great poem, or any beautiful poem, or any meaningful poem is a medium toward what can be invented with it, or what can be expressed through it.⁴²

The task that McClure described required will power, but it succeeded through collective action. The reality of ties in the present was confirmed by a sense of ties extending across time not only through the recovery of ancestors, but, more important, through progeny.

"Where the children are, there is the Golden Age," wrote Novalis, quoted

by Michael McClure in an appreciation of *Semina*.⁴³ The poets and artists who came to maturity in the post-World War II years were part of the baby-boom-producing generation. As with most of their fellow citizens, parenting was an important part of everyday life for this generation of artists and poets. Kids running around galleries were a prominent part of art openings in the mid-1950s, Joan Brown recalled, and then added, "My father used to go to the openings and bring my dog and have him do tricks. I would be so embarrassed, I would die, and everybody would tease me." She emphasized that the environment in California was very different from her experiences of the New York art scene because on the West Coast children and friendship seemed more important to people's lives than money and career building.⁴⁴

Certainly painters and poets on the East Coast had families as well, but Brown's memory accentuated the ideal of the arts as a community by picturing artists as a sort of extended family. Thus, representations and reflections of the period added a symbolic value of Edenic innocence to the factual reality of families, children, and friendships. Art is learning "how to rearrive at the cycles and wheels of childhood," Jack Hirschman wrote in his comparison of Berman to William Blake.⁴⁵ The use of family snapshots in art exchanged by mail linked the avant-garde to the common concerns of much of their generation. The child playing with an automobile tire became a mandala image, reinforcing the aspect of children as connections to cosmic creativity (fig. 30). Affectionate photographs of Berman with Tosh are similar to pictures that might be found in any family album (fig. 31). They also helped to reinforce Berman's community identity, which linked fatherhood to his conception of art. He was not unique in this concern, for the use of children in posters and book covers was common. Berman put a photograph of himself and his son on the poster for his Ferus Gallery show; David Meltzer used a photograph of his daughter Jennifer for the cover of *We All Have Something To Say To Each Other*. Stan Brakhage's film *Window Water Baby Moving* (1958) presented natural childbirth as a cooperative venture between mother and father



30. George Herms, "Happy Virgo" card, late 1950s. Patricia Jordan papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



31. Patricia Jordan, photograph of Wallace Berman and Tosh Berman, 1958. Patricia Jordan papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

that confirmed the sacramental nature of marriage. When the graphic scenes of a child emerging from the womb led to problems with local police departments determined to protect citizens from images of genitalia, Brakhage took to including clips from the film in letters he sent to his friends.⁴⁶

Joanna McClure compared working with children with poetry readings as giving her “the same feeling of being at home, the feeling of place.” The birth of her and Michael’s daughter led her to start writing. “The poems were always personal. I never thought of them for publication; they were a way of keeping track of myself and a way to get to certain things that I could not get to without writing.” As she started to publish, preparation of her books developed into a family process involving her husband and daughter in the selection of poems, typefaces, and illustrations. She viewed the family as an entry to a wider audience, since one of the key functions she thought art filled was to build and strengthen the affective ties people had to the world around them. In focusing feelings of love, people grasped on to the most concrete and immediate aspects of their lives and defined what was truly essential.⁴⁷

Patricia Jordan’s collage of Shirley Berman (fig. 32) romantically juxtaposes its subject with exotic Egyptian, Persian, and Italian Renaissance imagery to suggest her role as muse. The upper image presents a courtship scene, while below is a representation of the myth of Isis and Osiris, in which the goddess resurrects her husband-brother from death. Layered behind the Isis story is a Renaissance image of a woman playing the lute, metaphorically suggesting the general creativity that unfolds under Shirley’s presence. It is a casual piece, a greeting card never intended to be exhibited, in which one married woman contemplated the life of a married friend and projected what amounts to an ideal type. The card, and there are many like it, reveals that alongside the interplay of male creative figures was another vision of sexual relationships that placed women at the center of a network based on tightly bonded domestic ties. Within this group that shunned public attention, male and female visions of community tended to blur. If the finished art and poetry was, as Robert Duncan thought, only the by-product of a life-style



32. Patricia Jordan, untitled, collage, undated. Patricia Jordan papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

attempting to “shape a vision of survival,” it came out of the interaction of people, and the individual craftsman only fashioned the final form of what was in effect a collective imagination.⁴⁸

In that sharing, however, women most frequently provided the practical component. Shirley Berman worked as a seamstress, while Wallace stayed at home to take care of their son. Joanna McClure went to work as a teacher, and Michael quit his job. Both Joanna and Michael were published poets, but she took responsibility for the questions of “how to make a living, where to live, what to do about children, the man you live with and your life. Those were my concerns.” Through marriage, McClure thought people grasped on to the most concrete and immediate aspects of reality, which were vital to poetry but not always a part of the arts scene. She recalled how she and Shirley Berman opened their homes to friends who needed a calming place to stay. Married couples stayed away from North Beach, McClure added, because the “destructive element was playing itself out” there, and those who were learning how to be parents could not afford to become involved.⁴⁹

The inscription of a women’s sphere encircling and protecting men was central for both men and women. They were creating a community from an interlocking network of domestic utopias. The contradictions of this imaginary society fell most acutely upon women, for as Berman portrayed in his *Veritas Panel*, they carried the burden of “holding things together.” In *Semina* 2 Cameron declared that she had “surpassed the tomb” men had dreamed for her. Her self-liberation she promised would allow men to liberate themselves, and male and female could recombine in a new strengthened union. “Now I rise up from death and attach my life along its entire length to the boundaries of your body,” she stated, “and lock our legs in serpentine strength against the earthquake.” The vision came to her in the course of a deep depression. Her husband had died, and only in his death, she admitted in this short piece, did she begin to see herself as an individual. Still she was not ready to claim an independent position as a woman. Her vision looks to marriage as the eradication of gender in humanity’s original “one flesh.” The

image of male and female intertwined around the tree of life derived from the kabbalistic belief that the first being, created in the likeness of God, was both male and female. The fall was the split into gendered identities, and the Sundered parts strove to reunite and regain what had been lost.⁵⁰ One function of art was to restore humanity psychically, if not physically, to the state of original unitary innocence.

Cameron's vision points to the difference between how men and women in the avant-garde community experienced the relationship of gender to their identity. Berman, like other young men his age, was concerned with defining and redefining male identity as part of his search for a place in society. The domestic relationship became the way he chose to define himself. Once he made that commitment, it was central to how he viewed himself and the art he created. Young women with artistic ambitions sought to dissolve the importance of gender, both through mystical conceptions and practical actions. Lenore Kandel recalled that when she first lived with poet Lew Welch, he expected her to spend her free time with "women folks" discussing "feminine magicals," while he ran around with other male poets. She insisted that they share both sides of life. The high point of their relationship came when he voluntarily acknowledged that she was as good a poet as he thought he was.⁵¹

As we saw with Joan Brown, women's recollections from this period more clearly link emancipatory and traditional images of femininity. Women defined a major aspect of their lives through service to another. Freedom did not mean free fall, but taking responsibility for living according to one's ideals. The hearth was an all-encompassing sanctuary that sheltered friends in need of healing. Yet their recollections also involve images of themselves as young women who abandoned their homes to travel to San Francisco or Los Angeles alone, or in the poet Joanne Kyger's case on to Japan, where she arrived in 1958 not knowing the language or a single person. A wonderful and curious aspect of Kyger's voyage abroad is that she spent her four years in Japan studying ancient Greek literature in depth. In Asia, the classics of her own culture suddenly became hers and hers alone.⁵²

The ability of “beat” women to be both free and connected was vitally important to the self-image that they wished to project. In some aspects their lives followed very traditional paths, but they wanted to assert the element of choice that had allowed them to recognize and grasp the chances that entered their lives to make a break with older, settled patterns. Joanna McClure at the age of twenty-one abandoned her first marriage to leave Arizona and go to San Francisco in search of a broader life. She came without any preconceptions of what she would find, because “growing up in the desert was mostly a time of waiting. Soaking in the beauty of the place—but waiting and not even knowing what I was waiting for.” Her assumption on leaving was that her outlook was so narrow she did not have the experience to imagine the range of possibilities open to her. That her new life included a second marriage, a family, and two careers as poet and educator told her that independence was the precondition for greater involvement and responsibility for other people.⁵³

The recollections of both men and women demonstrate how powerful a hold gender roles had upon their lives, even though a theme of their “rebellion”—and this theme was fundamental to mass-media representations of their lives—was to discard obsolete stereotypes about sexual relations and roles inherited from the previous generation. The idea that poetry and art opened daily reality to a transcendent realm may have exacerbated tensions in male-female relations. The putative stakes involved in the pursuit of art were high, and both members of the couple shared in the responsibility for the outcome, even if only one was a direct creator. The expectations men and women brought to relations undoubtedly caused strain, since few could sustain for long the tension, and yet, as Michael McClure’s poem from *Semina* 2 suggests, emotional union seemed essential to self-actualization:

I wanted to turn to electricity—I needed
a catalyst to turn to pure fire
We lied

to each other. Promises
are lies. Work is death. Contracts are
filth—the act of keeping them
destroys the desire to hold them

I forgive you. Free me!

Marriage seldom lived up to the promise entailed in the relationship, yet as the last line suggests, McClure could not imagine another road to liberation except through a relationship, the seriousness of which was measured by promise and contract. The mate offered freedom by creating the environment in which masculine ambition could be realized without consuming the male in his own striving to be “pure fire.”

If the male task was to harness phallic energy without being destroyed, examining the excesses of personal behavior was vital. For society at large the beats as a media event provided boundaries to effective male behavior, a task performed within the avant-garde by those who succumbed to heroin. Fascination with excesses was essential to striving to accomplish one’s ambition, to inscribe upon the world the particular virtues of one’s individual excellence. A man needed to push himself, “to turn to electricity” to use Michael McClure’s phrase, but he also needed a cautionary model that would allow him to stop long before his ambitions consumed him.

For women the balancing act was more difficult. Domesticity allowed for a centered, stable female self-image, while, as we saw with Joan Brown, a gendered professional identity led to striving to live up to externally defined ambitions. A degendered self was a strategy for grasping an individual, unique, but female history. Each victory, whether in the aesthetic sphere or the domestic, was personal. Equality therefore had a precious aspect, the sign of maturation and autonomy achieved through commitment to the transcendent possibilities of art. Thus women within the arts community projected an ideology of domesticity as a sign of equality and empowerment. It was an ideology that many men were glad to accept as their own. Other men, however,

found the particular powers of women threatening to their ability to tap the phallic reservoirs which they assumed generated their personal creativity. "The social organization that is most true to the artist is the boy gang," Allen Ginsberg argued, "not society's perfum'd marriage."⁵⁴

For those in the media trying to understand the beat phenomenon and present it to the public, focusing on the consistently libertine and misogynist Kerouac was less confusing. His self-destructive tendencies fit more neatly into a tidy, moralistic worldview. Berman was as talented as Kerouac, at least as typical of his generation, but his commonalities with "straight" society lay in family values rather than ambition. Kerouac pursued success as a writer to the point of becoming an "outlaw," and he achieved a name for himself through his efforts. The two men present the hidden Apollonian and well-publicized Dionysian faces of their generation, and the latter fit more easily into public fascinations. The media event of the beats provided a vicarious release from personal responsibilities, yet with warnings in its reports of the self-abuse that these young men heaped upon themselves with alcohol and narcotics. Kerouac helped create a male subjectivity that appeared "free" of constraints. The responsibilities of family were not to interfere with single-minded devotion to career.⁵⁵

To achieve that imaginary freedom, Kerouac's characters exist first and foremost in a state of rebellion against women because through sexual union generational continuity was reestablished, and the individual was placed once again in time, beholden to both past and future. Quoting Buddha, the hero of Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *The Dharma Bums* says, "Don't dispute with the authorities or with women."⁵⁶ In Kerouac's novels, "authorities" inevitably means the police. The aphorism equated women and the police as the foundations of repressive daily society, the local figures immediately present to punish the male pursuit of pleasure or self-knowledge. The hero of *The Dharma Bums* returns home to his mother, who worries about his inability to settle down into a career and make a living from his college education.⁵⁷ In *On the Road*, the hero's aunt, who raised him as a surrogate mother, tells him

that the world would never find peace “until men fell at their women’s feet and asked for forgiveness.” Sal Paradise, explaining this to Dean Moriarty, agrees: “The truth of the matter is we don’t understand our women; we blame on them and it’s all our fault.” Moriarty protests, “But it isn’t as simple as that. . . . Peace will come suddenly, we won’t understand when it does.”⁵⁸ Neither faith nor good deeds leads to peace, Moriarty seems to argue. “Peace” is a random occurrence and not likely to be recognized. It has the elusive quality of death, as a state of being going beyond experience. Moriarty’s vision of peace also incorporated Kerouac’s Catholic faith: redemption can come at the oddest moments. Even those leading the most disreputable lives can experience an awakening of the heart to God when they least expect it.

Maternal figures criticize, but they also offer unconditional support to their men. They threaten men, Robert Duncan observed in a witty anecdote about the relation in the postwar Bay Area of younger male and older female poets such as Josephine Miles, because they are “lady sheep” trying to teach “little wolves . . . to eat grass” and be happy.⁵⁹ In times of trouble, Kerouac’s male characters return to their mother figures for a meal and a place to stay until they are rested and ready for further adventures. Women as sexual partners are the source of quick money and physical pleasure, the red meat that the wolves need to devour to actualize their wolfness—but at a price of emotional bondage. After two weeks, Paradise complains, “I knew my affair with Lucille wouldn’t last much longer. She wanted me to be *her way*. . . . I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion.”⁶⁰ A “*real woman*” accepts whatever comes her way, Moriarty tells Paradise: “Never a harsh word, never a complaint, or modified; her old man can come in any hour of the night with anybody and have talks in the kitchen and drink the beer and leave any old time. This is a man, and that’s his castle.”⁶¹

In *The Dharma Bums*, written six years later, Kerouac tried to reconcile life in the moment with the acceptance of continuity and history implied in literary ambition by turning to Buddhism. The sexual conflicts that gave

structure to *On the Road* yielded to the presentation of a model of idyllic matrimony. Sean and Christine Monahan are a young couple with property in the Marin County foothills. They offer refuge to poets who need a place to stay, but without any of the recriminations that *On the Road's* maternal figures offered along with their food. All the poets need to do is meditate and follow their craft, which all accept as a form of prayer for salvation, the release of humanity from the illusions of material existence. Monahan is a carpenter who maintains his home and car by his own skills. He "had selected a wife who agreed with him in every detail about how to live the joyous life in America without much money." He liked to take days off from work to go into the mountains and study Buddhist sutras. Christine "wandered around the house and yard barefooted hanging up wash and baking her own brown bread and cookies. She was an expert on making food out of nothing." Her willing acceptance of a stereotype of premodern relations frees Sean from all troubles. "Sean in fact was just an oldtime patriarch," Kerouac enthused. "Though he was only twenty-two he wore a full beard like Saint Joseph and in it you could see his pearly white teeth smiling and his young blue eyes twinkling." Because of his wife's housekeeping skills and her love of washing and baking and mending, "Sean, working only desultorily at carpentry, had managed to put a few thousand dollars in the bank. And like a patriarch of old Sean was generous, he always insisted on feeding you and if twelve people were in the house he'd lay out a big dinner. . . . It was a communal arrangement, though, he was strict about that: we'd make collections for the wine, and if people came, as they all did, for a long weekend, they were expected to bring food or food money."⁶² While men achieve Buddha-nature through study and writing, women's Buddha-nature subsists in the activities that come most naturally to their social role: washing, cooking, raising children, and making love. Kerouac proposed two models for authentic male behavior: Men who accept the responsibilities of family must be prepared to work and earn the money needed to maintain patriarchal dignity. Men who cannot

work must remain single, though not celibate, as women may also achieve salvation through “yubyum,” a form of Tibetan ritual sex with men who have devoted themselves to monastic prayer.⁶³

It is easy to ridicule Kerouac’s vision of male-female relations.⁶⁴ *On the Road* had the virtues of honesty in its self-damning portrayal of emotional confusion when confronted with the unbreakable links between pleasure and responsibility. *The Dharma Bums* escaped into utopian fantasy that confirmed that when female characters are turned into cardboard stick figures with clearly defined and limited utilitarian functions, so too are male representations stripped of the possibility of surprise or change. In this novel, Kerouac crafted a male subjectivity incapable of relating to other human beings except through the driest and most literary of theories. The evasion of responsibility for the personal, intimate relations one develops was a profound strand running through the public aspects of the postwar avant-garde. The fear of ties was the dark side of a philosophy that stressed personal vision and connection with the abstract forces of the cosmos over social relations. It found expression in a subjectivity impervious to the effects of a man’s actions upon anybody, including himself. It was therefore a subjectivity that lay helpless before the world.

There was a philosophical sundering within the avant-garde that was no secret within the movement. This split provides another, internal explanation for the reluctance discussed in chapter 6 of many artists and poets to embrace the beat image. In 1959 Stan Brakhage wrote Larry Jordan that he could offset the “horror of the beats” only by contemplating the chills the publicity the beats received gave academics who fetishized “two thousand years of Western Culture.” He believed that both the beats (understood as the media event evolving from the success of Kerouac’s *On the Road*) and academics crushed the connection of poetry to life.⁶⁵ On the other hand, Gerard Malanga’s poem on the Bermans reiterates themes Kerouac stated about Sean and Christine

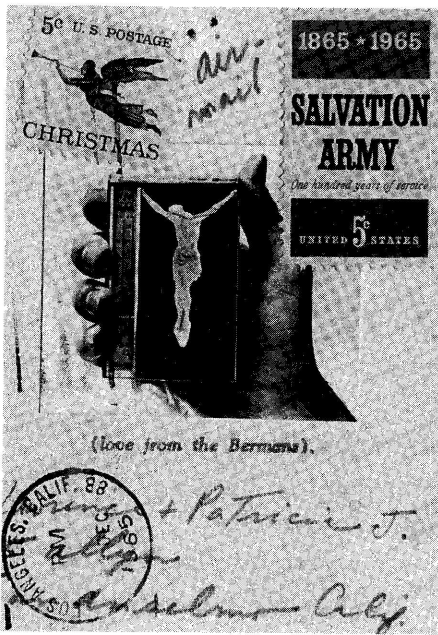
Monahan in *The Dharma Bums*, but also reveals the critical distance that many male poets felt about the kind of life led by those who married, however hospitable their homes might be for spiritual travelers:

the private lives and poets overlooking
the enamel sink and tub
its destinies . . . we try to escape.

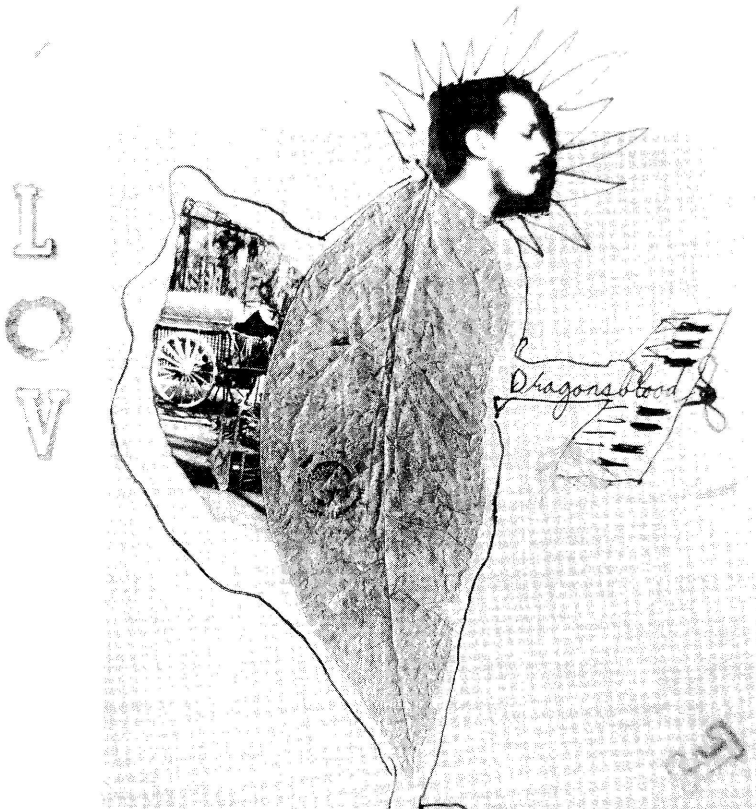
Am I moistured, exaltingly, and in this room
that gives me entrance gives you no exit?⁶⁶

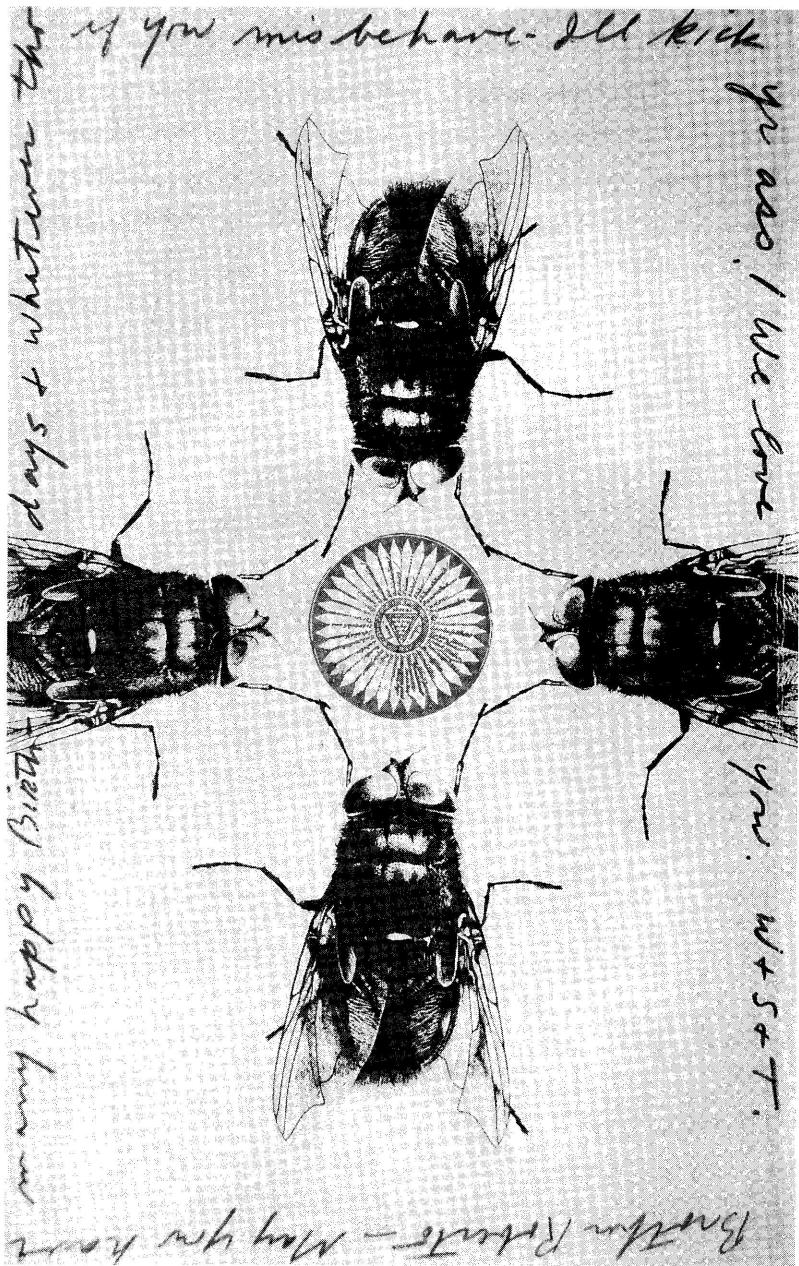
Freedom versus responsibility. Risk-taking self-affirmation versus life-affirming emotional ties. Ambition versus domesticity. For public commentators the excesses of the “beats” were reduced to a narrow set of questions: What is the relationship of freedom to libertinism? Are desire and responsibility compatible? Were the structures of knowledge governing human interaction derived ultimately from experience, or was experience based on a priori systems of rationality and faith? Members of the 1950s American bohemia asked themselves the same questions.

The answers men gave about what to value inevitably affected the work they produced and the example they set for others. The cleavage within the “beats” was hidden to those on the outside, in part because, as we have seen with Berman, the avant-garde expression of domesticity diverged from the mainstream standard in ways that made its manifestations confusing and perhaps even frightening. The ideology of domesticity, for example, crossed lines of sexual preference. Larry Jordan recalled that Robert Duncan and Jess had taught him the meaning of the home as a “magical kingdom” that needs to be protected “from all the wayward vibrations that come and go.”⁶⁷ A home was not simply a place, but the psychological wholeness of one’s connections brought into being by one’s imagination. Freedom need not be free fall if linked to the relationships one cherished; freedom came from the creation of self through ties with the new rather than from severance of all

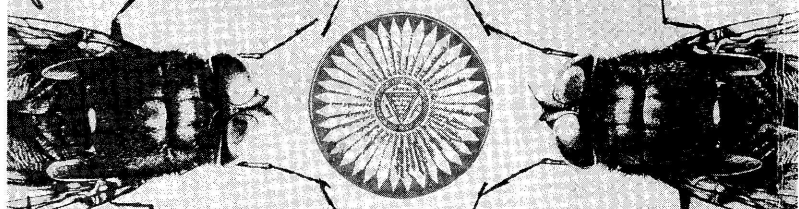


33. Selection of mail art: Wallace and Shirley Berman, Christmas card to Patricia and Larry Jordan, 1965; George Herms, "Dragonsblood," to Ben Talbert, undated, early 1960s; Wallace Berman, cover to *Hero/Lil* by David Meltzer, with handwritten birthday greetings to Bob Alexander. Patricia Jordan papers and Bob Alexander papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.





if you mis behave - I'll kick you ass! We love you.



W+S+T.
Boston Rocks - May you have many happy birthday days + whatever the

ties whatsoever. For Duncan, if there had been any one single reason why he could not consider himself a “beat poet,” it was his strong belief in the importance of being a “householder” who refused to think of himself as a “professional heretic and exile” always just clinging on to life: “No, because I’ve surrounded my writing . . . with a position for itself.” Respectability, he concluded, a *great* respectability, marked the work and lives who assumed responsibility for their desires.⁶⁸

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Phoenix and the Tortoise</i> . Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1987.

Chapter 8

1. "The Bored, the Bearded, and the Beat," *Look* 22 (August 1958); award letters in Wallace Berman papers, AAA; *Arts Magazine* (London) July 1966, 67; Dennis Hopper, introduction to *Bruce Conner: Assemblages, Paintings, Drawings, Engraving Collages, 1960–1990* (Santa Monica: Michael Kohn Gallery, 1990). The article in *Look* featured a full-page photograph of the Berman family in their San Francisco home. Berman complained to a friend of the offensive inaccuracies in the article. Among the errors was a description of him as a New York associate of Ginsberg and Kerouac who followed them west. In fact, Berman came to California in 1930 and never set foot outside the state until a trip to London in 1966. See Berman to David Meltzer, October 1958, Berman papers, AAA.

2. Berman to Jay DeFeo, July 1965, Jay DeFeo papers, AAA; Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: From Face to Shining Face," *New York Times*, 29 September 1968, D32; P. Adams Sitney, "A Tour with Brakhage: Underground Movies Are Alive Along the Pacific," *Village Voice*, 5 December 1968, 53. See also Tom Kent, "Everything Changed," *City*, 19 February–4 March 1975, 75. In addition to Dennis Hopper, Berman's entertainment industry collectors included Peter Fonda, Teri Garr, Murray Gribbin, Jack Nicholson, Michelle Phillips, Bob Rafelson, Bert Schneider, Phil Spector, Dean Stockwell, and Russell Tamblyn. See Berman papers, AAA, and *Wallace Berman Retrospective* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1978) for information on collectors.

3. A contrasting, distinctly negative view came from gallery owner Irving Blum, one of the first people to promote Andy Warhol and the owner of the complete Campbell's Soup series. Blum decided to drop Berman from the Ferus Gallery in 1959. "Wally's work somehow, for me, lacked a kind of edge." He thought Berman was an "extraordinarily provocative guy who could convince you about anything, and somehow I was a bit suspicious of him, I remember. Although I was assured by everyone that he had extraordinary genius, I somehow felt that there were some problems that his interest was disparate, that it was too scattered, that he wasn't sufficiently focused and would pay a price as a consequence. I still feel that way about him. But he was a provocative guy. A very extraordinary human being, extraordinary person. Sensitive, warm, brilliant, I think, and really the touchstone for all the poetry activity that existed in California" (Irving Blum, "At the Ferus Gallery," OHP/UCLA,

72–73). Blum exaggerated the centrality of Berman's involvement in poetry, but his comment expressed a somewhat commonplace attitude. People in the visual arts tended to play up Berman's importance as a poet, while poets overestimated his professional reputation as an artist.

4. Cameron, interviewed 1986 by Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art* (Santa Monica: Corcoran Gallery, 1987), 70.

5. In an undated letter to Berman written ca. 1963, Michael McClure told him, "Unfortunately you and I have some funny thing going and pride and vanity comes up between us. *Now* where I would really like to write a poem ABOUT YOU I wrote one and dedicated it to you" (Berman papers, AAA). The poem McClure mentioned was "Lip, Beginning with a line by Soo Doong-Paw."

6. Joan Brown, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Joan Brown, Session #2," AAA, 25, 27–28.

7. Stan Brakhage to Berman, "Early July 1965," Berman papers, AAA.

8. Michael Fles to Bob and Anita Alexander, 16 November 1986, Bob Alexander papers, AAA.

9. Shirley Berman interviewed 1987 by Sandra Leonard Starr, in *Lost and Found in California*, 90.

10. Charles Brittin, interviewed 1986 by Sandra Leonard Starr, in *Lost and Found in California*, 73.

11. Announcements are in exhibitions folder, Berman papers, AAA. Artists and photographers who exhibited at Berman's "Semina Gallery" include Charles Brittin, George Herms, John Reed, Arthur Richer, and Edmund Teske.

12. Shirley Berman, interviewed 1986 by Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 70. This transition from formal to transcendent concerns also occurred in the work of Edward Kienholz. When Kienholz constructed his first pieces in 1954, he turned to wood as a substitute for paint. He wanted to develop thick textures. "I wanted thick paint and didn't have the money to buy the paint. So I nailed boards onto things and painted them to get that third dimension" (quoted in Arthur Secunda, "John Bernhardt, Charles Frazier, Edward Kienholz," *Artforum* 1 [October 1962]: 30).

13. Description of *Veritas Panel*, and subsequent descriptions of *Cross* and *Temple*, drawn from Merrill Greene, "Wallace Berman, Portrait of the Artist as an Underground Man," *Artforum* 16 (February 1978): 56, and John Coplans, "Art is Love is God," *Artforum* 2 (March 1964): 27, as well as observation of Charles Brittin's photographs of these pieces. Neither Greene nor Coplans had seen the pieces and based their descriptions of these destroyed works on discussions with the artist, his wife, and friends of the Bermans. See also Anne Bartlett Ayres, "Berman and Kienholz: Pro-

genitors of Los Angeles Assemblage,” in *Art in Los Angeles: Seventeen Artists in the Sixties*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1981; Henry Hopkins, “Recollecting the Beginnings,” in *Forty Years of California Assemblage* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, 1989). *Veritas Panel, Temple, and Cross* were destroyed in 1958 after Berman left Los Angeles.

14. “An Interview with Walter Hopps,” in *Wallace Berman Retrospective*, 9.

15. The kabbalah was a form of gnostic philosophy developed in Jewish communities in twelfth-century Spain. Kabbalists taught that the Hebrew alphabet was an interpretive key to reading God’s intentions when he created the world. Interpreters of the kabbalah gave three primary meanings to aleph (א): primal chaos as potentiality of meaning; Adam in his capacity as the bestower of names upon the divine creation; and the ox, the beast of burden that brings order to the wilderness and yet can never be fully tamed of its own streak of inner wildness. Berman was fond of the interpretation of aleph as “the all-encompassing man,” which is also how he liked to think of himself (Merril Greene, “Wallace Berman, Portrait of the Artist as an Underground Man,” 53). “I speak of the Poet,” David Meltzer wrote, explaining his use of א in his second book. “He is my sign for man” (David Meltzer, “Patchen,” *We All Have Something To Say To Each Other* [San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1962]). Carlo Suares, editor of the *Cahiers de l’Étoile* in the 1920s and 1930s, wrote that aleph stood for the revelation that could come only from within each human soul, without the intervention of prophet or messiah (Carlo Suares to Edouard Roditi, 1927, Edouard Roditi papers, DSC). In tarot, aleph presented a feminine aspect, as it represented one of the three mothers that guided creation. The mothers, Aleph, Mem, and Shin, then established the scales of merit and guilt, between which the tongue emerged as balance between the two ways of rendering judgment (Akiba ben Joseph, *The Book of Formation of Sephir Yetzirah*, trans. Knut Stenring [London: William Rider and Son, 1923], 19, 25). Aleph then was a symbol for the pursuit of meaning as the fundamental human activity. It was a symbol that spoke to the creation of community through shared names given to experiences.

16. Interview with Bob Alexander by Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 57. In 1947 Berman designed a phonograph album cover for Dial Records, as well as a series of lithographs on bebop for Jazz Tempo.

17. Phrase quoted from a letter from Berman to Larry and Patricia Jordan, 28 January 1965. In this letter, Berman reported he was rereading Nijinsky’s diary, which was “one of the books that lifted me from the poolroom” (Patricia Jordan papers, AAA).

18. The cross symbolized for Boehme “the Fourth Property of Eternal Nature. The Magic Fire. The Fire World. The First Principle. The Generation of the Cross. The Strength, Might and Power of Eternal Nature. The Abyss or Eternal Liberty’s

Opening in the dark World, breaking and consuming all the Strong Attraction of the Darkness” (quoted from the *Works of Jacob Behmen* in Charles Poncé, *Kabbalah: An Introduction and Illumination for the World Today* [San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973], 54). This book was in Berman’s library at the time of his death, though of course it could not have been in his possession at the time he created *Cross*. Berman’s work reformulated themes central to Kenneth Rexroth’s long poem “The Phoenix and the Tortoise,” in which the poet argued that a person’s intimate associations were the key to fundamental aspects of being. Berman adopted the themes of Rexroth’s poem as the basis of his everyday life.

19. Robert Duncan, “Wallace Berman: The Fashioning Spirit,” in *Wallace Berman Retrospective*, 21.

20. Quote from back cover, *Semina* 2 (December 1957). The correct spelling of the judge’s name is Kenneth Halliday. Placement of pieces in the show in the gallery re-created by George Herms in his 1987 interview by Sandra Leonard Starr in *Lost and Found in California*, confirmed by Charles Brittin in conversation with author, 1993.

21. The piece they are examining is Wally Hedrick’s antiwar assemblage *Rest in Pisces*. Berman demonstrates a crank that rotates the disc on the top and rattles the “swords” below.

22. “An Interview with Walter Hopps,” in *Wallace Berman Retrospective*, 9.

23. Her husband was Ralph Parsons, the founder of Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Material on Cameron drawn from artist files, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery.

24. Quoted in Gerald Nordland, “The Suppression of Art,” *Artforum* 2 (November 1962), 26. Judge Halliday had presided over the trial in 1956 against bookseller Jake Zeitlin for selling Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*. Halliday found Zeitlin guilty but had endured days of testimony from expert witnesses. The California Supreme Court overturned his decision in 1962 in *Zeitlin v. Arnebergh*.

25. Shirley Berman interviewed by Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 92.

26. Charles Brittin interviewed by Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 93.

27. John Coplans, “Art is Love is God,” 27.

28. *Semina* issues, 1956–1964, are on file at DSC and AAA.

29. A complete collection of *The Artist’s View* is located in BL. The inspiration and general guidance of the publication came from Claire Mahl. Other contributors were Jeremy Anderson, William Faulkner (a Bay Area poet and painter, not the Mississippi novelist), and Philip Roeber.

30. “The pocket of poems gives me a physical sensation as I take one out and put it back” (Wallace Fowlie to Berman, 26 October 1959, Berman papers, AAA).

31. In a letter from Michael McClure to Berman, 16 November 1957, McClure introduced himself on the recommendation of Walter Hopps and submitted several poems for Berman's consideration. He then suggested that Berman contact Jack Kerouac and Philip Whalen and provided addresses. *Naked Lunch* was first published in Paris by Maurice Girodias's Olympia Press in 1959. The edition could not be sold in the United States until 1962, but excerpts from the novel were published in the *Chicago Review* (Spring and Autumn 1958) and in *Big Table* 1, nos. 1 and 2 (1958).

32. Pantale Xantos makes allusions to several Greek words, but the name has no direct translation. Ξανθός (xanthōs) means yellow, while χανθός (khanthōs) can translate as the "lost man." Pantale relates to πανθός (panthōs), "wholly, entirely," and to πανθοιώς (panthoiōs), "all sorts." It is also close to both παντάλας (pantálas), "all wretched," and πανταλήθης (pantaletḥés), "all truthful."

33. There may have been other alteregos used in *Semina*. Berman's correspondence files are not complete, and many contributions did not come through the mail. Names of contributors that were not known independently within the circle of people surrounding the Bermans may very well be Berman alteregos. See Merril Greene, "Wallace Berman," 54. Paul de Man in "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94 (1979): 921ff., made the point that all texts serve to create counter-autobiographies. On the distinction between autobiographical and diaristic presentations of self, see Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17, 21, 27, 39–40, 61; Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 16, 179, 237; Jean Starobinski, "Le Style de l'autobiographie," *Poétique* 3 (1970): 258–259.

34. Quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 16.

35. Robert Duncan, "Wallace Berman: The Fashioning Spirit," in *Wallace Berman Retrospective*, 21–23. For anthropological discussions of Native American peyote cults see J. S. Slotkin, "Menomini Peyotism," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 42 n.s. (December 1952) and John Smythies, "The Mescaline Phenomena," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 3 (February 1953).

36. Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 236, 218.

37. Philip Lamantia, "Black Sea," in *Narcotica* (San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1959).

38. Berman photographed this sequence of pictures for the cover of Lamantia's *Narcotica*. However, the pictures used for the book present Lamantia against a backdrop of a crucifix and a papal portrait, reflecting the poet's Italian Catholic background.

39. Perkoff had for several years condemned heroin and its variants. In 1959, under the influence of poets Tony Rios and Anthony Scibella, Perkoff began to take

heroin regularly. Perkoff had recently been selected for inclusion in Donald Allen's anthology for Grove Press, *The New American Poetry* (1960). Believing that this burst of good fortune had put him in the major leagues of new American poets, Perkoff panicked, because he worked slowly and did not see how he could live up to the honor. He lacked the verbosity and biblical incantatory power of Ginsberg, but "boplicity" points to other virtues, in which language creates its own mental reality that can be experienced as a fact. He hoped that the embrace of heroin would give him the power to meet the challenge. Perkoff's writing virtually halted, and he produced only casual diary entries. He abandoned his family and fled to Mexico, where heroin cost only \$14 a gram, and if not legal, was not a substance that the police tried to control. In 1962, after returning to the United States, Perkoff was arrested for possession of heroin. He pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of transporting marijuana and was sentenced to five years in federal prison (see John Arthur Maynard, *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991], 138–148).

40. "You are Captain Turn-On from Los Angeles," McClure wrote in a quick note the following morning, promising a manuscript of the experience (Berman papers, AAA).

41. McClure, "Interview with Michael McClure," BL, 40–42.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Untitled comments by McClure on *Semina* 8, McClure file, Berman papers, AAA.

44. Joan Brown interviewed 1987 by Sandra Leonard Starr, *Lost and Found in California*, 87.

45. Hirschman, "Wallace Berman," in *Wallace Berman* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968).

46. See Stan Brakhage to Larry Jordan, 3 April 1959, in Patricia Jordan papers, AAA.

47. Quoted in Barbara Gravelle, "Six North Beach Women," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, 21 October 1979, *California Living Magazine*, 34.

48. Robert Duncan, "Structure of Rime XIX (for Shirley and Wally Berman)," in *Roots and Branches* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 169.

49. Gravelle, "Six North Beach Women," 33.

50. See Charles Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition, and the Kabbalah," in *Zone: Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part 1, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Urzone, 1989), 51–53.

51. *Voices from the Love Generation*, ed. Leonard Wolf (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1968), 36.

52. Joanne Kyger to Patricia and Larry Jordan, 1962, Patricia Jordan papers, AAA.

53. Gravelle, "Six North Beach Women," 33.

54. Quoted in Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 79. I choose the word "ideology" to stress that this was a structure of ideas and representations that provided a framework for expressing values on an ideal level, independent of, though not entirely unrelated to, behavior or psychology.

55. Philip Shaw has argued that the progressive character of romanticism lodged on its Dionysian side because it worked to exhaust the possibilities of representation, while the Apollonian remained nostalgically fascinated with the power of previous systems of representation. See "Exceeding Romanticism," in *Subjectivity and Literature from the Romantics to the Present Day*, ed. Philip Shaw and Peter Stockwell (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991). While one must be careful about conflating the details of Kerouac's life with the novels he wrote, one of the effects of Kerouac's success was his gradual withdrawal from the avant-garde social circle and return to family and childhood friendships in Lowell, Massachusetts. In 1962 he married Stella Stampas, the sister of a close boyhood friend and nurse to his ailing mother. By all accounts, the marriage was not romantic, but re-created the system of familial support he had known as a boy and honored ambiguously in his novels' maternal figures.

56. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 147.

57. *Ibid.*, 105.

58. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: New American Library, 1957), 101.

59. Robert Duncan, "Conversations with Robert Duncan," BL, 47.

60. Kerouac, *On the Road*, 104.

61. *Ibid.*, 168.

62. Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 127–128.

63. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

64. For an extended diatribe on Kerouac's female characters, see Eliot D. Allen, "That Was No Lady . . . That Was Jack Kerouac's Girl," in Jack Kerouac, *On the Road, Text and Criticism*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 504–509. To be fair to Kerouac, his character Marlou in *The Subterraneans* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), a black prostitute with whom the hero lives, is a strong female character determined to remain independent in a world that she is aware despises her because she is a woman, a black, a prostitute, and an heroin addict. In this character, Kerouac projected on a woman the striving for anarchic freedom that otherwise in his writing was an exclusively male quality.

65. Stan Brakhage to Larry Jordan, 3 April 1959, in Patricia Jordan papers, AAA.

Brakhage did not name the “academics,” but strident, often hysterical criticism of the beats had come from John Ciardi (“Epitaph for the Dead Beats,” *Saturday Review* 43 [6 February 1959]: 11–13), T. S. Eliot (interviewed in Roy MacGregor-Hastie, “Waste Land in Russell Square,” *Trace* no. 32 [1959]: 1–5), Norman Podhoretz (“The Know-Nothing Bohemians,” *Partisan Review* 25 [Spring 1958]: 305–318), V. S. Pritchett (“The Beat Generation,” *New Statesman* 56 [23 August 1958]: 292–294), and Diana Trilling (“The Other Night at Columbia,” *Partisan Review* 26 [Spring 1959]: 214–230). *Wagner Literary Magazine* 1 (Spring 1959) published a “Symposium on the Beat Poets” with critical comments by Marianne Moore, Herbert Read, and Dorothy Van Ghent, with replies by Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and Peter Orlovsky.

66. Gerard Malanga, New Year’s card to the Bermans, 18 December 1963, Berman papers, AAA.

67. Quoted in Solnit, *Secret Exhibition*, 34.

68. Robert Duncan, “Conversations with Robert Duncan,” BL, 151–152, quote on 154–155.

9

The Flame of Ambition

Public Culture in the Kennedy Years

In the summer of 1962 the Bermans returned to Los Angeles because making expenses meet their income might be easier if they lived in the small house they owned there. Another attraction was the sudden blossoming of the southern California art scene. Seven galleries had opened that were devoted exclusively to contemporary art, and even conservative galleries had begun to promote younger, experimental artists. The Los Angeles Art Association, whose longtime president was Lorser Feitelson, sponsored weekly “Monday Night Art Walks” that brought hundreds to La Cienega Boulevard, where the most advanced galleries were located. Berman’s friend Walter Hopps had become director of the Pasadena Art Museum, while Henry Hopkins, another active proponent of local artists, was assistant curator for contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The two museums began active education programs to encourage collectors to support avant-garde art. For Berman, the possibility of an audience, even of fame, raised new questions about the public role of the artist. As he increasingly engaged social issues, he began to consider the effects of ambition upon the search for inner truth.

Berman began working on a series of portraits with rubbed-out faces. He also became an active member of the Los Angeles Film Society, which provided equipment to would-be underground filmmakers and exhibited films at special midnight screenings. Berman introduced the films of his San Francisco friends Bruce Conner and Larry Jordan to Los Angeles audiences. At

this time, he met Andy Warhol, who stayed in Los Angeles for eight weeks during his one-artist exhibit at the Ferus Gallery. While in Los Angeles, Warhol shot most of his film *Tarzan and Jane Regained . . . Sort of* at Berman's house and gave Berman and his son Tosh parts in the production.

In August 1963, one year after his return to Southern California, Berman completed the eighth issue of *Semina* (fig. 34). Its contents were markedly different from previous editions. The selections conveyed a sense of imminent social turmoil, and the identification of authors by initials added an aura of mystery. This was no aesthetic of impersonality, Michael McClure explained in a comment on *Semina* 8. Anonymity was a necessary protective step against "Zittermokka, Esq." and the "SS deathsheds" gathering strength in America. The military machine was mobilizing to silence all forms of criticism, and those who were not prepared would not survive.

McClure's comments may refer to the persistent threat of war that marked the first two years of the Kennedy administration. The failed proxy invasion of Cuba in March 1961 by United States–organized anti-Castro exiles led to a hardening of Kennedy's foreign policy. The new administration was determined to commit American might to prevent any further communist successes. Crises in Laos, Berlin, and Venezuela rapidly succeeded each other, and Kennedy warned the American people that United States soldiers might have to enter into direct combat, while he continued to increase the number of military advisers stationed in Vietnam. In October 1962 Kennedy placed a naval quarantine around Cuba in response to the Soviet Union secretly installing intermediate range missiles with nuclear warheads capable of hitting targets in two-thirds of the United States. The two-week crisis brought the world close to nuclear war, but in the aftermath, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a period of *détente*, leading to the signing of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty in September 1963. But even while discussion of superpower condominium filled the nation's media, so did increasingly violent news from the civil war in Vietnam. In May 1963 Buddhist monks set themselves on fire and burned to death to protest the Catholic-dominated

government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Their sacrifice exposed the shallowness of popular support for the government that the Eisenhower administration had created for South Vietnam. In October a coup widely believed to have been initiated by the Americans overthrew Diem to install a military dictatorship. President Kennedy faced a difficult decision, still unmade at the time of his assassination, whether to increase American military support for the new South Vietnamese government or to find a diplomatic solution.

When one lives in perpetual danger, McClure continued in his comment on *Semina* 8, "one takes care of what is nearest, dearest, knowing." The issue was premonition of a need to keep "shy and private." Despite the presence of socially relevant imagery, McClure's comments, steeped in the underlying domestic ideology of his and Berman's work, indicate that this issue was the opposite of social criticism. There was no attempt to show how power relations affect personal choices in order that private dilemmas can boomerang back into the political arena. Berman's advice was, rather, stay away from public life. And, indeed, he directed the message only to a handful. As McClure put it, *Semina* 8 was "a shot in the dark that wants to stay in the dark." Berman prepared a mere 149 copies to be mailed to "the Friends."¹

Semina 8 was also, perhaps primarily, Berman's warning to himself not to be swept up by new, exciting developments in the arts. It was as if he saw that in March 1964 John Coplans would identify him as the founder of the California assemblage movement and therefore one of the most important artists in the state, or that in four years his face would be on the cover of the biggest-selling record of the most popular music group of the decade.² We may think of it as a warning from a man tempted to seek a public platform that a second chance would bring even more disastrous results than his scrape with the law in 1957.

The use of initials instead of full names thus might be directed to poets and artists as an admonition not to be carried away by the lure of success. Create as if one were to remain anonymous all one's life, as anonymous as medieval troubadors. The card bearing a poem by A. A. (Antonin Artaud) shows a

It is me

Man

*who will be judge
at the end of the count
it is to me
that all the elements
of substance and things
will come to refer
it is the state of my
body will carry
The Last Judgement*

A A



34. Selected cards from *Semina 8* (1963).



dessicated cadaver wearing a silk dress and holding a bright rose. "It is to me / that all the elements / of substance and things / will come to refer," A. A. says. This is a classic restatement of the *vanitas* theme. Fame and publicity are as absurd and grotesquely macabre as a fine gown decorating a corpse. One ought to live, Berman seems to be saying, as if our motivations will survive our bodies. Poets should beware lest their lives be consumed by gaudy, but ultimately inconsequential, even foolish, concerns.

In examining the poetry his friends had sent him and images from the mass

media, Berman concluded that growing publicity for poetry and art did not mean American society had changed. What could those who tried to be honest about their lives face except disaster? For the cover of *Semina* 8 (fig. 35), Berman photographed a tableau: Thomas Albright, a painter from San Francisco soon to become art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, slumped over his writing desk, seized by the police as he finished sketching a cross. The scene plays as farce, but it points back to Berman's own arrest in 1957 for, in his view, depicting his religious sentiments. What place did J. W. (John Wieners) have in society as long as he continued to express in poems like "Le Chariot" his personal search for transcendence through heroin? Z. W. (Zack Walsh) sketched a geography of the world focused on the sources and varieties of "junk." Berman's collage of comedian Lenny Bruce, lauded by ivy and butterflies but beset by the fist of a policeman beating a prisoner, was a simple reminder to his readers of Bruce's frequent arrests and of the role of the police in repressing free speech. Popularity, such as it would be, meant restricting one's work to material that could slip past the then-existing anti-obscenity codes. His collage of an American eagle swooping upon the battered head of prize fighter Benny Peret slumped against the ropes could read as a reminder that becoming a celebrity meant offering oneself to sacrifice for public enjoyment.

These were somber messages, but the criticism of American life was refracted through a critique that focused exclusively on the roles available to poets and artists. "I am that noise which / must against their / common paraphrase / charge deceit," says the lyric by J. K. (Jerry Katz). The juxtaposition against the hand of a black person giving the finger might read as a reference to an incipient black power movement. Throughout the previous year, the civil rights struggle in the South had filled newspapers and television screens. In March 1963 the conflict reached new levels of brutality in Birmingham, Alabama, after the Southern Christian Leadership Council organized silent marches to demand that blacks have equal access to public accom-

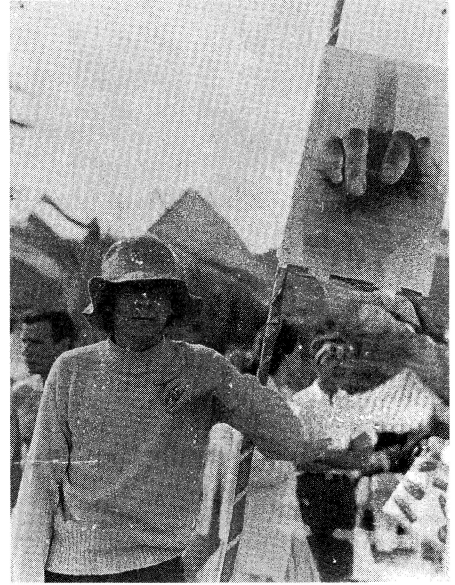
modations and city jobs. When police chief Bull Connor ordered the use of fire hoses and police dogs to break up the marches, young children joined the marches. The images of snarling dogs lunging at thirteen-year-olds provided powerful symbolization of sheer brute power fighting innocent moral justice. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* published three to five pages daily of reports on events in the South, and the network evening news programs seldom spent less than five minutes on the latest demonstrations and brutalities.

At this point the public voice of the civil rights struggle emphasized non-violent resistance and unassailable moral superiority based not only on justice but on civility. Yet privately, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were uneasy about a strategy that exposed blacks to persistent and growing physical danger but failed to guarantee either adequate outside protection or the right of self-defense. These dissenting views rarely found expression in the national media, and the most visible proponent of black nationalism was Elijah Muhammed's Nation of Islam, the Black Muslim movement that catapulted Malcolm X to prominence for his uncompromising denunciations of all aspects of white society.³

The mass media's interest in transgressive behavior led it to emphasize the Nation of Islam's repudiation of white superiority. Within the black community, the messages the Nation of Islam conveyed of black self-reliance and pride were equally important. These values had helped build large congregations in both San Francisco and Los Angeles. In April 1962 Black Muslims were involved in a highly publicized exchange of gunfire with the Los Angeles Police Department, because the Muslims refused to allow the police entrance to their offices without proper search warrants. It is possible that Berman had these events in mind as he conceived of the card on which he put Katz's short poem. The statement of poem and image within that context appears to predict what developed in 1965 with the Watts uprising, the emergence of the Black Power movement in Mississippi, and the dissolution of the



35. Cover, *Semina* 8 (1963).



36. Wallace Berman on anti-Vietnam War march, mid-1960s. Wallace Berman papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

civil rights ideal into a violent, insulting polarity between black and white America. Yet this card is more easily explained by Berman's intense participation in the bop scene in the late 1940s, when the black and white avant-gardes were linked in disdain for middle-class white society. Berman fell back upon the stale equation of African-Americans and the avant-garde as two "outsider" cultures, both marginalized, both impolitely mocking and defying the mainstream by their refusal to conform to proper middle-class life-styles.⁴

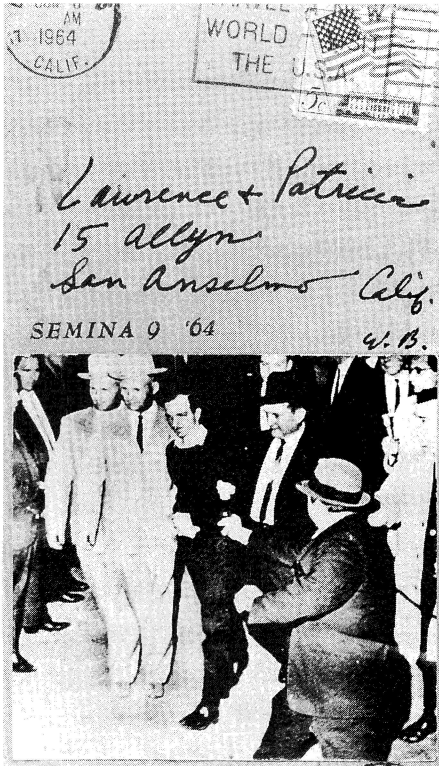
The political affinities of Berman the citizen were in radical opposition to the status quo in the United States. He joined demonstrations in favor of civil rights and protection of the environment. He marched in opposition to the Vietnam War, bringing with him a banner displaying the photograph he juxtaposed with Jerry Katz's lyric from *Semina* 8 (fig. 36). In 1971 he won a Linus Pauling Peace Prize for the best visual art promoting world peace. Yet to the

degree that Berman the artist could be said to be a social critic at all, his stance was irresponsible and defeatist, as he warned of the dangers of active involvement in public life. Rather than commenting on the social events of his day, Berman used *Semina* 8 to reaffirm his belief that poets find their success in the private rather than the public realm. One collage (fig. 37) presented a mysterious cat figure emerging from an impressive set of gates where a soldier stands guard. The writing above the gate seems foreign, and the soldier's beret and striped pants locate the scene outside the United States. We might have here a surrealist comment on foreign affairs. The cat figure's briefcase suggests a politician rather than a prisoner, and the large keylike apparatus in the cat's hands also suggests mastery of the situation. This could be a statement on the imprisonment of the human spirit, suggested by the stone face within the cage, that politics entails. When read together with the Artaud card, this image could augment the warning to poets that participation in public life will make them prisoners of forces much craftier than they. We might, however, recall Joan Brown's interest in Egyptian mythology and the role of the cat god that appeared later in her paintings as a symbol of the artist in control of her life (pl. 7). Following that clue, the image could suggest the artistic spirit escaping social limitations through the exercise of its special magic. Both readings carry equally plausible sense, and neither would close other possible interpretations. Ultimately, an image such as this finds meaning only in the responses of Berman's audience as its members sifted through the cards, compared them, and followed the trails blazed within each imagination.

The ninth and final issue of *Semina*, produced in the winter of 1964, contained only one item, Michael McClure's "Dallas Poem," with a cover photograph shot from a television screen of Jack Ruby killing Lee Harvey Oswald (fig. 38). This was undoubtedly a political and social statement among the most direct that Berman ever made. Yet consider how puzzling and offensive McClure's poem would have been to anybody who was not part of their circle of friends:



37. Card from *Semina* 8 (1963)



38. Cover, *Semina 9* (1964).

DOUBLE MURDER! VAHROOOOOOHR!

Varshnohteembreth nahrooohr PAIN STAR.

CLOUDS ROLL INTO MARIGOLDS

nrah paws blayge bullets eem air.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Yahh oon FLAME held prisoner.

DALLAS!

No elegy for the lost prince here. No song that transforms public tragedy by finding universal meaning. Simply a comic-book picture of America devouring itself. This was a cold and brutal, though accurate, assessment of a country where psychological strivings to leave a mark meant no one was innocent. McClure's poem paralleled pop art, but its sentiment was entirely different. This poem was not about comic books or Hollywood movies, or about their effects on the public psyche. In 1961 McClure began studying the great carnivores, and his use of "mammal language" was an attempt to develop a nondenotative poetic language that when read aloud would mobilize basic passions of lust and aggression, normally repressed through the built-in censorship of the emotions that everyday language effected. The confrontation in art and poetry with the power of the passions was to provide an alternative to their eruption in sudden, destructive, and remorseless public behavior.⁵

Semina 9 was a coldly distanced response to what their contemporaries felt was one of the most tragic event of their lives. This joint work attempted to give an accurate, albeit psychological, description of social reality. The killing time had arrived, and for all the public sorrow, the dominant fact facing America was the sound of bullets, repeated as in the poem to the point of tedium. This indeed was a remarkably prescient understanding of what would follow—both the escalation of the war abroad and the transformation of ghettos into battlegrounds.

The work was "nonideological." It presented not even the remotest suggestion of a theoretical understanding of politics, or what might be done. Its truth came from an inward confrontation with personal desires and ambitions. The strivings and tensions wrought up in postwar Americans had reached their point of sublimation. The steam generated by egos determined to escape limitations would power a culture that fed on social chaos. The flame refers certainly to the Kennedy grave site and the televised ritual of lighting a flame as pledge to perpetuate the Kennedy ideal. In gnostic philosophy a sacred, tended flame stood for sacrificial slaughter, the body given to eat to establish communion, as those in the Christian faith affirmed their

membership in the church by eating the transubstantiated body of Christ. Sacrificial slaughter provided the *mysterium fidei*, the mystical transformation of substances that corresponded to the *factum fidei*, the act of physical regeneration, that is, sexuality. Just as sexual union perpetuated natural creation, human sacrifice was the basis for the replication of social order. The nature of the sacrificial victim and the trauma registered on the psyches of those who participated in the victim's consumption set the future direction of social life.⁶

Kennedy's death became a public sacrifice through the intervention of television. For three days the nation endured a sequence of rituals: the death of the president, the rapid apprehension of a suspect, the public slaughter of the suspect who thereby was transformed into a scapegoat for national guilt, the funeral and burial, and the lighting of the flame. What McClure and Berman suggested was that rather than purging the nation of its sorrows, the televised rituals enshrined perpetually mysterious murder, that is death and violence for their own sake, at the heart of American public life.

Semina 9 points to the electronic media as instrumental in constructing a new public consciousness and culture, built around vicarious paranoia that can be satisfied only by more victims. The killing time would result from the tendency of the mass media to engulf authentic private experience in a mythologically intensified, yet existentially shallow public life. Profoundly serious events played themselves out as episodes in a continuing cliff-hanger. Once public life became a creation of the mass media, McClure and Berman could see only murder ahead. Yet the critique was not simply external, offering up television as villain to satiate a need for resentment. Consider the meaning of the line "Yahh oon FLAME held prisoner" against a poem by Robert Duncan presented six months earlier in *Semina 8*:

Increasing the orange until arrangements of
animal forms are merged in tallow,
Increasing a grade until numbers sound as
tones alike in wandering,

Increasing knots until the orange current is
built perpetual upon the hectic,
Increasing the ocean is boxed in ties to
others and machines as mothers.

Might not McClure's "flame held prisoner" be the poetic desire to achieve transcendence entrapped in spectacle? Duncan's poem also spoke of an intensification of experience, but when we see it on its card with a photograph of Duncan nude, floating upside down toward a brilliant orange ball, a new interpretation follows. The intensification of experience drives poets as well, as they seek to refine their experiences in verbal and visual form. Their own aesthetic ambitions carry the danger of meltdown. Their own desires, presented in the highly focused form of poetry, mirror the transformations of mass communication. All expression carries with it the danger of self-abuse and destruction, self-encasement in a mythological worldview. What Alexander Trocchi and Philip Lamantia did hurt only themselves, but what drove them had deeply frightening parallels in public life.

Berman's and McClure's conjectural observations on American life sprang from their recognition of explosive and dangerous drives within themselves. They believed social collapse would result from the release of long-repressed psychological states, deriving largely from the tensions of masculine identity suspended between the drive to excel and responsibility to others. They had found in satisfying sexual relationships the force to control these reactions, but in a society based upon sexual hypocrisy, many would never find this ballast. Self-recognition projected upon society at large convinced them that difficult days lay before the United States and the world. The apparent relevance of Berman's fixation on the daily lives of poets for developing social crises is evidence that the specific tensions of poets' lives, involving both career and gender identities, replicated broader social contradictions in intensified form. Berman's most original contribution to the understanding of his society lay in extrapolating from his own, relatively narrow experience an understanding

that the desire to excel in the public realm was a threat to inner peace and domestic utopia. Applying these conclusions to the political life of the United States, he saw ambition and public ritual mobilizing the most negative forces in the American psyche. Having severed all but emotional connections to the public world, his observations had little objective foundation. The subjective truth of his meditations on purely personal questions lent his work the character of a prescient vision of social tensions yet to come.

With the ninth issue, Berman put aside *Semina*. His discovery of the Verifax reprographic process gave him a new way of exploring universal connections, in a form that allowed him to confront more directly mass-produced imagery and the transformation of social relations into spectacle, the simulacrum of poetry. His efforts at community building came to an end. The counterculture had emerged as a projection onto mass culture of the private ideas that had motivated Berman and his peers. Inevitably, incorporation into the mass media meant deformation. Berman had warned his colleagues that they were now part and parcel of the dynamic American society, no matter how much they had wanted to stay apart. The task at hand then was to pose more sharply the ability of aesthetic production to sever the power of social construction and allow people to construct their own identities through access to a more powerful, but less noisy universal reality.

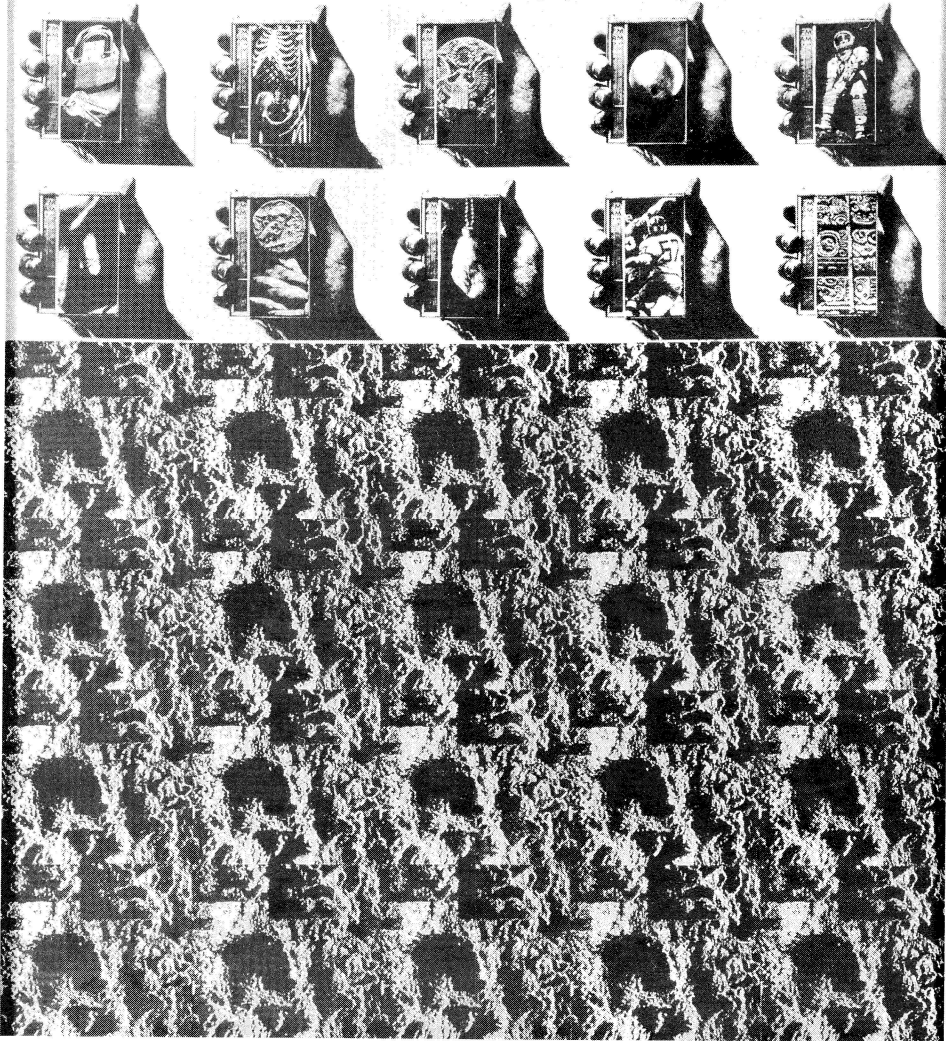
In 1964 William Jahrmarkt, owner of the Batman Gallery in San Francisco, gave Berman an old Verifax photocopier, one of the earliest models of reprographic technology, used primarily by architects for duplication of blueprints. Berman spent six months learning how to control chemicals and settings. Even though the Verifax was a system for mechanical reproduction of visual images, the process was so primitive that no two prints were alike. Berman constructed his Verifax collages from images clipped from magazines. He built the collages layer by layer by rerunning the paper through the system to add another image. While the paper was still wet, he often rubbed out sections or applied other chemicals by hand to alter the image.

Occasionally he painted over the photographic collages with bright acrylic

paint (pl. 8), but most of the work preserved the somber, dull sepia and white surface of the paper as it came out of the machine. He could produce either negative or positive images, but generally he preferred the tonalities of negatives. The visual form with repetitions of images that appear nearly identical carried with it the risk of tedium (fig. 39). In Berman's collages, however, no panel in the grid was identical in content. Berman's work presented a fluctuating pattern of images that appeared to be similar only when the grid form fatigued a viewer's attention. Those who look must choose to do so and then look carefully to find the variety underlying the surface similarity. There is little rhapsodizing in Berman's Verifax collages, and a tendency, if only through emphasis on monochromatic tonalities, to mute the emotional appeal of his imagery. Personal values disappear into ambiguity, though the referents to American society are clear and inescapable. By drawing his imagery from motion pictures, television, advertising, pornography, and popular journals, he represented the force of the new media to consume all previous culture and make it more widely available while simultaneously stripping it of context and inherent meaning.

The signature of Verifax collages was the use of the transistor radio as a framing device. Berman had first tried setting his images within portable television sets, but he found the squarish shape limiting. The oblong rectangle of the transistor radio provided greater visual flexibility for the images he appropriated. It was a brilliant maneuver that came at a time when sales of these hand-sized radios were booming, not only in the United States, but throughout the world. Even more than television, the transistor could represent the triumph of electronic culture and its democratic potential. Television could not escape the connotations its image carried of manipulation of public discourse by a narrow group, in the United States the three networks. Radio, with its AM/FM bands, conveyed an excess of messages. The public system of meaning production had exploded, and this aspect gave Berman hope. The sheer bulk of images created in contemporary society seemed overpowering, but since it was impossible for anybody to absorb everything produced, all

חופ במ גדילג מג יקש ארהו דע אנב נט ידו תממ המ רהש תלמס ה קובג



39. Wallace Berman, untitled, Verifax collage, 1965. Courtesy of L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California.

images risked becoming meaningless. The viewer had to select images out of the plethora that had appeal. The electronic culture willy-nilly reintroduced choice, and therefore the possibility of refusal. In the continuous flow of images one grasped only what caused an emotion to erupt within. Truth lay within the receiver, not in the transmission, which was merely an empty sign, or to use a term prevalent in Berman's circles, a glyphic form, that became meaningful only as one saw oneself refracted through it.

His Verifax posters frequently contained slogans that mimicked advertising statements but transformed random slogans into a kind of concrete poetry. A statement like

RETARD PARA.33. SEC.12.MM
KILO/MAMA RE CANAAN XX.8
LUNARSEED JACJAC. AMER.R
EVOLUTION/ELEK.99VT LOVE

was wonderfully suggestive in numerous directions but pointless to try to decipher as if there were one privileged but hidden meaning awaiting discovery.⁷ The message is equivalent to fortune-telling practices, which allow people to organize their hopes and perceptions of the possibilities facing them.

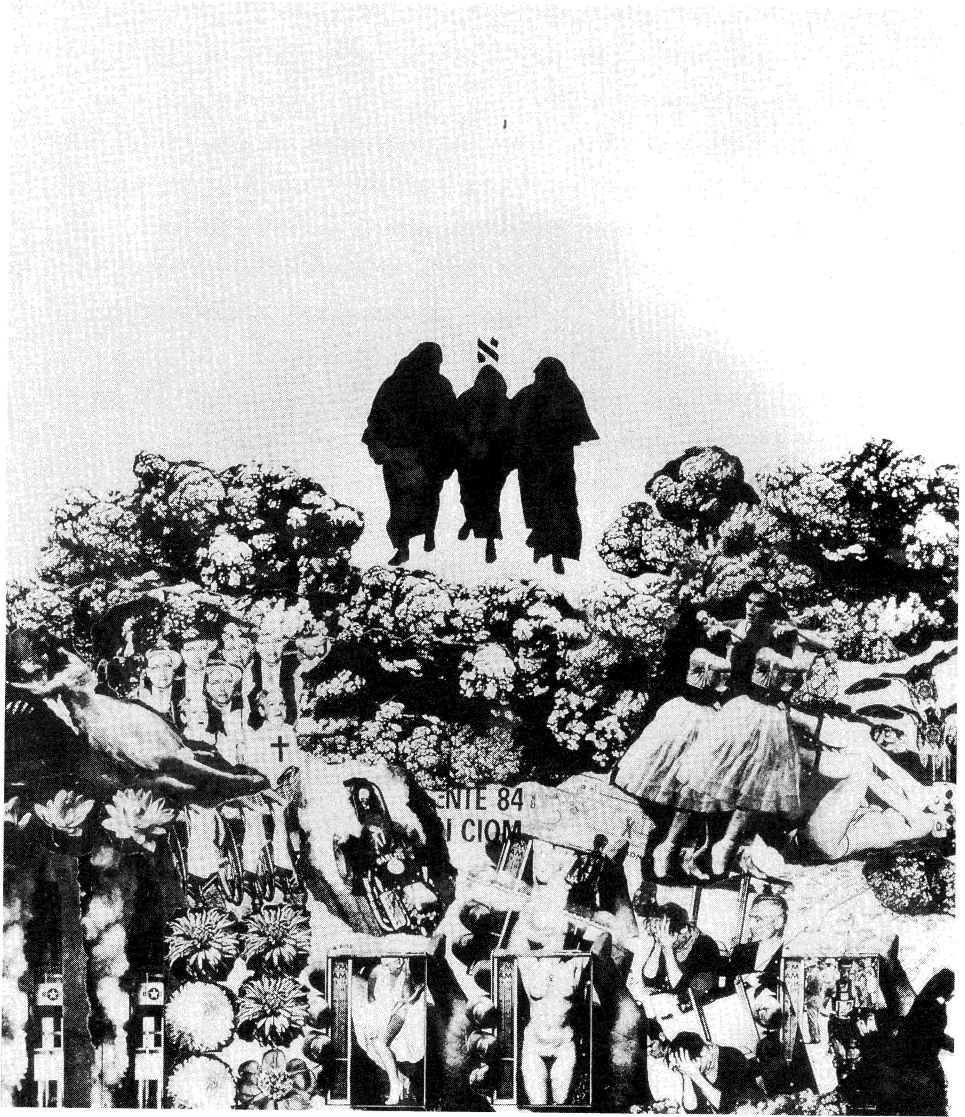
Still the mass production of goods and communications had created only the possibility of a purely private sphere of value. Even if we accept that Berman liberated himself, there was nothing in his program that destroyed the tyranny of the mass media for others. His strategy was to isolate particular images and juxtapose them to suggest that their meanings were in no way closed by their original context. His work stood as testimony that here was an *individual* capable of rereading and reinterpreting the messages bombarding him, an *individual* responsible for protecting his own spiritual state, an *individual* who had protected that which was "nearest and dearest" to him. The context of his art was entirely social, drawn from the everyday refuse of

popular culture, but the response he projected as an alternative was idiosyncratic. As such, it was impotent politically, but could be turned into a valuable commodity in the fine art market.⁸

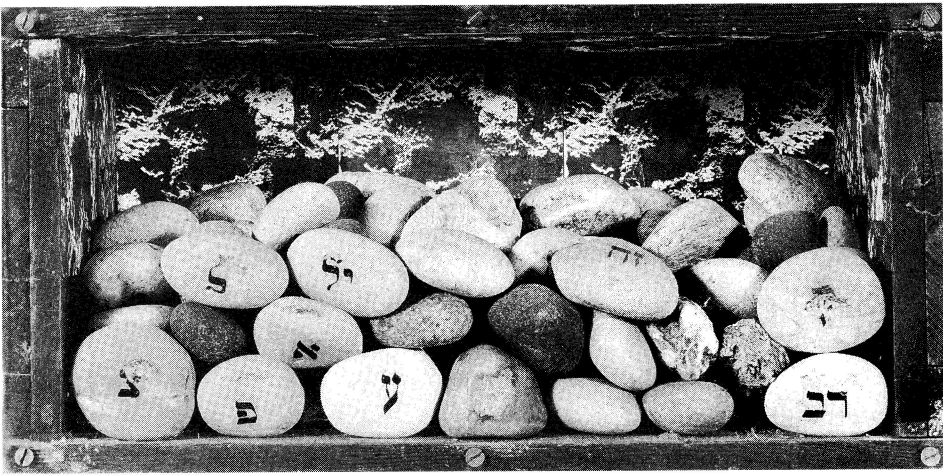
The irony of using mechanical means to manufacture nonduplicatable results did in fact attract considerable attention in the art world. Irving Blum, owner of the Ferus Gallery after it turned commercial, found the work extremely attractive. From Blum's viewpoint, Berman's collages seemed to derive from Andy Warhol's photosilk-screen paintings with their panels of repeated images drawn from newspaper photographs.⁹ On Blum's recommendation, *Artforum* ran a feature article on this work. Reaction to the Verifax work led to exhibitions in London and New York, as well as at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Berman made his first sales. His appearance on the *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* album cover may well be homage to the influence of this work on Tony Cooper's design concepts (fig. 40).¹⁰

In one of the few extant transcripts of an interview with Berman, recorded in London in 1966 in conjunction with his exhibition at the Fraser Gallery, Berman's responses string along in a series of possible answers that reveal that a question has infinite responses with none correct except those relevant to the questioner at the time. "One can hardly ignore the very mystico-magical quantities in these pieces," Tanya Belami began. "Are they purely intuitive or might one search for actual philosophical imports in them?"

His verbal patterns, perhaps exaggerated by the hashish that he and the interviewer shared, are unquestionably what the slang of the day called "spaced." When he expressed himself through a work of art, his thinking coalesced into patterns of sharply clear and brilliant points. In the interview all one can see are the pulsating patterns of possibility: "There is an involvement with choice fragments . . . musical and magical counterpoint . . . the transistor as denominator." He compared "the mysteries of the current event" coded in mass communications to the "magnetic memory of volcanic rocks." He



40. Wallace Berman, *Scope*, Verifax collage, 1965. Collection of Dennis Hopper. Courtesy of L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California.



41. Wallace Berman, untitled, mixed media, 1972. Courtesy of L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California.

called his Verifax images “special attack forces” and likened them to “cold and warm windshields,” peyote, holography, drama, “waltzing ventriloquists,” Vesuvius erupting, and “metal sheaths on underground cables.” Ultimately he related the images to his understanding of the kabbalah, particularly the first two letters, aleph, the connection between order and chaos, and beth, symbol of language as the dwelling place of humanity.

The letter beth which is the mouth as man’s organ of speech . . . his interior . . . his habitation . . . denotes among other things interior action and movement . . . when in conjunction with the one preceding it. Aleph forms all ideas of progress . . . of graduated advance . . . the passage of one state into another locomotion. I don’t know, dig the works. It’s all there. In my work though, an involvement with the mysteries of the current event.¹¹

Berman called transistor radios the kabbalah of the twentieth century, a conceit based on the multiple meanings of the Hebrew word. In addition to tradition, *kabbalah* in Hebrew could also mean both transmission and recep-

tion. In the process of conveying heritage, the transistor radio was the most ubiquitous mode for the transmission and reception of messages in human history. Berman consistently tried to replace the everyday view of the media with gnostic and kabbalistic concepts. Mass-media images could be understood as equivalent to a deck of tarot cards (pl. 8), to be reshuffled and redealt infinitely, with each reading, as Berman had attempted to demonstrate in *Semina*, proposing another set of connections.

Turning to the kabbalah for an interpretive key to phenomena was one manifestation of a broad-ranging interest in mystical, religious thought pervasive in the mid-twentieth-century avant-garde. Allen Ginsberg arrived at Tibetan Buddhism, while Gary Snyder followed the more ascetic Zen discipline. Joan Brown's studies of Egyptian religion and Hellenistic mystery cults informed her paintings after 1965, while Wally Hedrick's work turned to an examination of the visual forms used in the kabbalah, particularly in the work of the German Protestant mystic Jakob Boehme, who figured prominently in Kenneth Rexroth's poetry. Robert Duncan, raised in a theosophist family which was otherwise conventionally middle-class, returned to the roots of his childhood religion after a period as a quasi-Marxist. In particular, through his studies of the modernist American poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) and the background sources to her work, Duncan spent years reading about the mystery cults of the Mediterranean.

Gnosticism as applied by artists and poets was primarily an approach to cognitive investigation.¹² Symbols and patterns were messages needing decoding to reveal a hidden truth of pervasive, underlying spirituality. Since every manifestation of existence had a symbolic level, students of gnostic philosophies trained their senses to be open to the possibility of meanings. Its practice led to both a heightened awareness of the world in its most material manifestations and awareness of one's own inner responses and cognitive capabilities.

The kabbalah developed in Jewish communities in Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a reaction against what the founding figures considered overemphasis on biblical exegesis in rabbinical practices.¹³ The early kabbal-

ists based their arguments on the Rabbi Akiba's comment that God had given two revelations of His intent, one in the scriptures, the other in the world itself. Just as the Torah did not reveal its full meanings to a casual reader but demanded interpretation and discussion across centuries to reveal bit by bit its potentialities, God's messages embedded in the course of creation remained invisible to those who had not been trained to see and hear in a special way. Relying on another rabbinical tradition that the Hebrew alphabet pre-existed the creation of the world, kabbalists argued that the alphabet linked the two revelations and provided the key for interpreting sensual experience. But whereas in scriptural studies, debating the potential meanings of words was central to uncovering paths of interpretation, in the kabbalah, the Hebrew letters had no direct connection to the interpretations derived from objects. The letters became a system of abstract symbols, a methodology for categorizing the world into twenty-two primary attributes and the myriad possibilities that appeared when the letters combined with each other. Despite its apparent turn to observation of natural phenomena, the structure of the kabbalah was highly intellectual and speculative. At the same time, however, the mode of categorization, the Hebrew alphabet, had no necessary or motivated connection to natural phenomena, and the kabbalah provided a potentially flexible approach for creative, novel impositions of meaning.¹⁴ As Gershom Scholem argued, kabbalism refocused Jewish inquiry into the nature of the divine from the practice of law to self-reflection: "It is through a descent into one's own self that a person penetrates the spheres separating man from God."¹⁵

For a man grounded in domestic ideology, the kabbalah provided a particularly comfortable intellectual framework for viewing the processes of the universe. The word *toldot*, for example, signified both divine creation and human procreation. Marriage and reproduction continued the creation of the universe narrated in the first chapter of Genesis. The kabbalah provided a method for recounting the various moments in the process of divine emanation. It allowed its practitioners to interpret human activities as part of, or

contrary to, the unrolling of God's presence. Sexual union was the metaphor without equal for divine process and therefore for the making of all meaning. Kabbalistic studies underscored Berman's commitments to his family by equating them to his commitments as an artist. Both acts, essentially private, generated the world of bodily sensations and the divine presence that gave human experiences meaning.¹⁶

The glyphic possibilities within Hebrew letters stripped of denotative functions provided a stimulus to poets to examine the world around them without needing to work out a consistent systematic correlation of phenomena to interpretative categories. Like astrology, tarot, and palm reading, the magic inherent in the kabbalah was the ability it gave to strip away the power of given meanings and put one's own import upon the phenomena surrounding a human being. The goal was not to overturn social structures but to create an autonomous space where those excluded from worldly power could exercise personal authority.

Jack Hirschman made one of the most concise statements of the political functions that Jewish mysticism could play for contemporary poets in his 1973 pamphlet *KS [Kabbala Surrealism]*. The combination of kabbalistic studies with surrealism, Hirschman argued, aimed at returning language to its original "glyphic state," which he equated with the expression of preverbal need, something similar to the sounds that infants make before they acquire their community's language. To incorporate kabbalistic symbols into contemporary art and poetry, the precise meaning of concepts was unimportant, though a general introduction to the main themes of Jewish mysticism was helpful. The central, specifically surrealist aspect of this interest in the kabbalah was to use the shapes and general ideas as springboards for the imagination. They allowed a "random orchestration of the mind."

Hirschman offered an explicitly political explanation, something that Berman never did. In an age of "showbusiness democracy," kabbalistic surrealism stripped images of their specific manipulative message and freed people

to put their own meanings upon the images they lived with. The glyphic state reduced images from communicative to formal levels and thus freed the images by making them meaningless. The recipient related the form to his or her own experiences, or the sign remained empty, and theoretically harmless. Narratives no longer provided the basis for a continuity of a self, a sense of progression toward ever-increasing mastery of the world. In a new world of amplified media, the self achieved continuity through self-conceptualization as a relatively stable pattern of interests and dislikes that scanned sensory input for sensations of similarity and difference, a process possible only if the majority of possible sensations became emotionally invisible. The self itself became glyphic, as it became a form going through a variety of experiences that recovered the ability of the infant to express needs and wants that had existed prior to social strictures imposed and enforced by everyday language.¹⁷

Hirschman's explanation can help us see more clearly the historical development of subjective distinctions embodied in the work of Rexroth and Berman, which otherwise treat similar themes. The earlier poet attempted to create a universal subjectivity that could encompass all experience. Implied in his project was a traditional narrative of a soul's progress from innocence to corruption to suffering and then redemption. Rexroth's modernist art proposed values that were validated by their correspondence to universal law. He intended to substitute one understanding of the nature of human being for another in a direct contest of ideologies. Berman's glyphic art focused on form rather than content. The shapes unlocked inner reactions in ways that were not bounded by predetermined meanings. Berman repatterned the self as a set of interests, existing in a state of kinetic potentiality. Rather than master the images, Berman's approach acknowledged their ubiquity in order to dissolve their power. From the fullness of nature so important to Rexroth's relation to the universe, we have moved (descended?) to the fullness of images, which being the basis of our sensory knowledge become in effect the natural

basis for subjective relation with all the rest of being. The foundation was faith in an ability of humans to find meaning even in chaos.

To accept the playfulness of images was therefore to refuse to let “language speak us,” as Robert Duncan argued in the unpublished preface to his book of kabbalah-influenced poetry, *Opening of the Field*. Glyphic form repealed all the meanings added to language “from all the generations of human use.” These meanings were the roots of the social power of the present. The ideal of individual liberty was a recovery of roots, a return to “radical origins,” which was simply the ability to derive meaning from experience.¹⁸ These roots were to be made visible and restored to use in everyday life, and thereby to break the hold of social codes. The concept of working “from within,” discovering the “inner design,” begins to assume clearer meaning: a statement of a project to break the power of dominant social codes over language and perception. The concept that meaning would be left perpetually undetermined was a challenge to social authority. Its strategy was elusive, since it did not counter given meanings with alternatives but tried to undercut the entire process by which specific meanings achieve normative status and authority.

The avant-garde ideology that Berman and his circle promoted resulted certainly in an alienation of the individual from social matrix, but in no way a separation.¹⁹ Freedom could be determined only by those willful, seemingly perverse acts that distanced one from integration into rational organization of social activity. Joan Brown established her freedom by walking away from the Staempfli Gallery. Berman’s situation was more complex. The fiasco of his 1957 exhibition at the Ferus Gallery remained for many years the dominant narrative of his life. He had tried to speak honestly of his most personal values and experiences, and society had humiliated him. For the next decade his work retold that story as a warning to artists and poets to master their own ambitions for public fame. To deepen his critique, he used the Verifax technology to show the power of private imagination over public imagery. To his

own surprise his work attracted attention. At the point when he could reverse the humiliation of his 1957 trial, he chose to do so in a manner that was meaningful only to himself and those in his quasi-imaginary community. The recurrent narrative presented in his work constructed around the bitter Ferus exhibition experience gave way to a new narrative ethos of voluntary renunciation. He told journalists in 1968 that he was not interested in having any more large public exhibitions of his work and returned home to continue working for himself and exhibiting to his small circle of friends.

That Berman never really seemed to enter into professional life, despite his prominent connections and friends, but continued along his own path, apparently untorn by the conflict between ideals and ambition that marked so many of his friends, made him appear increasingly like a saint as the sixties progressed. Turning aside from the mass public that could be his, he became for his friends a genie of creative possibility who could slide past the madness and self-destruction of ambition. He had always preferred to live in the private circle of his family and friends, but that choice was not truly his until he had the option of incorporation into a system he abhorred. Freedom, as he defined it, therefore required the persistence of an oppressive superstructure. That was the rub. The mass media were not to be escaped. One learned to live with them, as one lived with any potentially dangerous natural phenomena. This victory through voluntary renunciation confirmed Berman's status as emblem for his "community" of artist friends. Berman's example, tangible for himself, but symbolic for others, allowed them to maintain an ideal of the arts that suppressed internal contradictions and its actual integration as one institution among many within society. Many lost their innocence, but Berman continued living as if the ideals of the 1950s were still valid and realizable.²⁰

In a mentality structured by a theory of the privileged relation of private vision to cosmic truth, the most private, personal, yet inescapably natural event was death. In 1946 Robert Duncan expressed the special role of artistic cre-

ation in facing mortality in a theosophical meditation. "In this life," he wrote in his diary, "we form the infinitesimal seed cells of the next life . . . we do not choose the body of our reincarnation—we make it." Poetry was the vehicle, Duncan mused, by which the soul released itself from the "night of the tomb" (attachment to daily life) into a spiritual existence.²¹ The true revolutionary work of poetry, he continued, was to concentrate personal energy into a self-image that could begin the process of embodying a new relationship to oneself and the environment. The ability to move forward through a series of choices meant that everyone remained incomplete and therefore fundamentally unknowable. A perspective that accepted death as central to human experience was able to view all conventionalized attitudes with a feeling of distance. Even if the values one accepted turned out to be essentially the same for all intents and purposes as those validated by one's society, they were experienced as new and self-generated, worked out in an individual way. They were no longer automatic principles by which others guided one's conduct.

Attention to death began the journey of an inner life struggling for autonomy back to the public sphere. The nominal movement into apparent solipsistic irrelevance was the precondition for redefining public standards for personal behavior. The primacy of private values developing within the avant-garde was then only a temporary way station in a broader shift that involved challenging the power of institutionally entrenched groups to define cultural inheritance, religious values, publicly allowable statement, as well as standards for individual behavior. The validation of personal experience was a validation of change, hence a return to history as a source of meaning, even if reflected through self-constructed, somewhat artificial traditions drawn eclectically from myth and hermetic philosophy. The development of a mystical self, seemingly disinterested in rationality or social reality, brought into play an historical self created both by its domestic commitments and its independence from the power-serving myths of the moment.²²

Artists and poets were not prepared for or competent to handle the kinds

of political stress they would endure—certainly one of Berman's principle messages to his fellow artists. Interpersonal dialogue, however valuable an element in establishing the needs of actual human beings as a foundation to group process, was nonetheless not the same thing as social dialogue, in which the participants attempt to uncover the ways social structure, discourse, and identity are produced, a dialogue that makes explicit the negotiations and mediations that occur between the various orders asserting needs. The resolution of the issues the avant-garde raised fell to other sectors, but not without artists and poets helping to define specific political issues dividing American society in the 1960s.

They had little to contribute to the civil rights movement or to the critique of endemic poverty. Their focus on spiritual states and their embrace of a modest income as a sign of disengagement blocked their interest in social allocation of economic resources. On questions relating to sexuality and gender construction, capital punishment, ecology, and the Vietnam War, for better or worse, the aesthetic vision became a central component. In the concluding chapters, we will examine how the avant-garde challenged both forces of religious tradition and of rational planning. Despite the inherent weaknesses of the aesthetic position, the avant-garde contributed to successfully subverting the ability of either force to impose its will upon the aspects of the American polity that it controlled.

It is a paradox that a movement of artists indifferent to politics should come to have a political effect. The form of their role has been confusing because of the lack of an intentional cause-effect relationship. In seeking to deepen their expressive capabilities, they projected into a society a subjectivity intent on revolutionizing the conditions of mutual understanding. Mysticism, irrelevance, and madness were all part of the game to overthrow all deterministic modes of thought. In a short poem found in his studio shortly after his death, Berman expressed the gamble he and his colleagues were taking, along a path that to others seemed irresponsible, but which from the inside was a

way of treasuring a shared independence that could also be responsible, if only to those to whom one was most directly attached:

when what
to my wondering
 eye
 should
 appear
near madness
as in basketball
a miss is as good
 as a mile²³

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>The Phoenix and the Tortoise</i> . Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. <i>World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth</i> . New York: New Directions, 1987.

Chapter 9

1. Untitled statement on *Semina* 8 by Michael McClure, McClure files, Berman papers, AAA.
2. John Coplans, "Art is Love is God," *Artforum* 2 (March 1964): 27–37.
3. Estimates of coverage on civil rights movement in *Los Angeles Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* based on reviewing issues from the period. Estimates on network news coverage from William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 174.
4. The most notorious statement of this position was Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro," *Dissent* 4 (Summer 1957): 276–293.
5. See Michael McClure, "Mammal Language," in *Meat Essays* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1962), and "Mozart and the Apple," "Pieces of Being," and "Blake and the Yogin," in *Scratching the Beat Surface* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982).
6. See Carl Jung, "Transformation Symbolism in the Mass," in *Psyche and Symbol: A Selection from the Writings of C. G. Jung* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 150.
7. The language has precedents in Hugo Ball's dada poems, the Russian constructivists, and lettrisme.
8. Manfredo Tafuri in *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976) argued that the avant-garde served to resolve the

planning contradictions of the twentieth-century city by promoting an ideology of multivalent imagery and by exalting formal complexity. Both aspects of vanguard ideology created an intellectual environment in which the failure to solve the practical problems of contemporary life could be celebrated as triumphs for freedom and unlimited possibility (pp. 137–139).

9. Blum was one of the earliest gallery owners to see the commercial potential of Andy Warhol's work. He organized the first Los Angeles exhibit of Warhol's Campbell Soup series and Brillo boxes at the Ferus Gallery in 1960. Blum owns a large collection of Warhol paintings, including a complete series of the Campbell Soup paintings, the work that first brought Warhol to public attention and ridicule.

10. See "Wallace Berman's Verifax Collages," *Artforum* 4 (January 1966): 39–42; letter from Philip Leider (editor of *Artforum*) to Berman, May–September 1965, and letter from Maurice Tuchman (curator, Los Angeles County Museum of Art) to Berman, 1965–1967, Berman papers, AAA.

11. "Excerpt from taped interview by Tanya Belami, London, at the residence of R. Fraser, London 1967," Berman papers, Box 2, Correspondence-miscellaneous, AAA. Ellipses are in the original and probably represent pauses rather than omissions.

12. By focusing on the practical connections between mysticism and poetic practice, I do not intend thereby to suggest that genuine religious faith was not also involved. Gary Snyder's understanding of Buddhism is legendary. His religious practice has not been simply a technology that he used to augment his craft, but moves through his writing and daily life alike as a basis for understanding his relationship to the universe. Many practiced their religious faith with genuine devotion. Others, Berman among them, refused to participate in organized religion, but absorbed aspects of religious thought into what would otherwise be a secular practice.

13. See the first chapter of Charles Mopsik, *La Lettre sur la sainteté: La Relation entre l'homme et la femme dans la cabale* (Paris: Verdier, 1986), for a recent historically grounded examination of the development of kabbalah as a specifically Jewish tradition.

14. See introductory chapter to Martin Buber, *Hasidism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).

15. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 341.

16. Charles Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah," 51, 57–60, 63–65.

17. Hirschman, *KS [Kabbala Surrealism]: An Essay* (Venice, California: Beyond Baroque Foundation, 1973).

18. Unpublished preface to *Opening of the Field*, notebook 2, Robert Duncan pa-

pers, BL. The parallels to existentialist philosophy are clear enough to warrant a presumption of influence. Yet the reading material that occupied Berman, Duncan, and Rexroth encompassed pre-eighteenth-century hermetic philosophers, religious mystics, and varieties of gnosticism. The influence of existential ideas then widespread in American intellectual life may have been to encourage independent study into pre-Enlightenment thought and the formulation of relatively original conceptions of the roots of existentialism.

19. Consider Harold Rosenberg's statement, "The famous 'alienation of the artist' is the result not of the absence of interest of society in the artist's work but of the potential interest of *all* of society in it. A work not made for but 'sold' to the totality of the public would be a work totally taken away from its creator and totally falsified" ("Everyman a Professional," in Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, 73).

20. Perhaps more appropriate than "saint" would be the Jewish concept of the "zaddik," a man who connected with God so that he was always present to divine mysteries even as he went through his daily routine. A zaddik had a weak sense of individuality from having communed so frequently with God. See Charles Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 86–88. Poncé gave Jakob Boehme as the most famous example of a Christian zaddik, who through contemplating the unground of freedom found divine nature.

21. Robert Duncan papers, BL, notebook 2, 213, 162 (7 September 1946).

22. See Paul de Man on the relationship of mythic and empirical selves in literature in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 196–201. For a discussion of modern society as a dialectical tension between everyday and systemic logics see Detlev Peukert, "Neuere Alltagsgeschichte und Historische Anthropologie," in *Historische Anthropologie*, ed. Hans Süssmuth (Göttingen: Geisteswissenschaft Institut, 1984), 63–64.

23. George Herms file, Bob Alexander papers, AAA.
